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RUE MORGUE

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2025 #227

12 **OF MYTHS AND MONSTERS**

One of the most fertile imaginations in the genre today, director Guillermo del Toro breathes new life into Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the movie, he says, that he was born to make.

PLUS! Del Toro reflects on nineteen-year-old Mary Shelley and her forebear, Mary Wollstonecraft; FX Wizard Mike Hill on bringing *Frankenstein*'s lumbering creature to life; and a look at the official companion book to Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein*.

by **ANDREA SUBISSATI**, **JAMES BURRELL** and **BENOIT BLACK**

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The Boulet Brothers team up with actor/writer David Dastmalchian to bring you *The Boulet Brothers' Holiday of Horrors*, their four-story anthology horror film, just in time for the yuletide season!

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A jigsaw puzzle that reveals a secret horror when assembled? Dare to piece together these Puzzles of Doom!

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NOTE FROM UNDERGROUND

Interviewing Guillermo del Toro for this issue's cover story was a pleasure, an honour, a true bucket list item, but it wasn't the first time I got to meet and chat with the Academy Award-winning filmmaker. That gig came back in 2017, when his art exhibit, "At Home with Monsters," arrived at the Art Gallery of Ontario, and I was tapped to moderate his conversation with co-curator Jim Sheddon for the opening night press conference.

I was fresh in this role of Executive Editor at the time, and the opportunity fucking terrified me. I had conducted many interviews by then, to be sure, but there's a big difference between getting serviceable quotes to embed in an article and having a conversation with one of Hollywood's sharpest minds in front of a roomful of journalists and fans. What's more, the AGO had very specific objectives for that media night: I was to touch upon topics x, y, and z, but absolutely avoid the topics a, b, and c, and – above all – we *had* to wrap up at *exactly* 35 mins. That last point was where I was most anxious. I'd seen GdT speak before, many times – the man loves Toronto, for some weird reason, and in addition to shooting here as much as he can, he's very generous with his time when it comes to doing lectures and discussions in the city. To hear him talk about film is a tremendous privilege, but the experience is somewhat akin to being blasted in the face full-force with a pressurized water hose of information – brilliant insight after brilliant insight, coming at you so relentlessly that you're still trying to absorb the brilliant insight from five minutes ago and he's dropped fifteen more since. It's exhilarating to experience, exciting to behold, but to be the one tasked with controlling that stream within specific parameters? Yeesh! I get imposter's syndrome from driving in the fast lane. The day I'm prepared to potentially *interrupt* Guillermo del Toro for a reason as trivial as time is a day that will never arrive.

I pulled it off – if anyone noticed how firmly my ass and jaw were clenched the entire time, they didn't mention it – but I was reminded of that experience when my interview opportunity for *Frankenstein* rolled around for this issue. Once again, I had exactly 35 minutes to discuss a topic so near and dear to us both that we could easily spend 35 hours on it. What you'll read in these pages is a transcription of our conversation the morning after the movie premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival. I hope you can imagine me sitting with him, struggling to keep a straight face as he delivered the most unique and insightful take on *Frankenstein* I've ever heard while dropping some bizarre but ridiculously profound metaphors along the way – you'll know them when you read them.

The last thing I want to do is paint the man as an uncooperative interview subject; he is an incredibly friendly and affable guy – cuddly, even – with an inviting demeanour and warm, enormous eyes, magnified to owl-like proportion behind astonishingly thick glasses. He's immediately disarming, in spite of his fame and talent, and I knew he was friendly with *RM*'s publisher, Rodrigo – he even has a charming Mexican nickname for Rod that he dropped the moment I entered the room, reminding me that I was with horror family and not just a Hollywood A-lister. And I hope that's something you take away from the piece, dear reader, because Guillermo del Toro might be racking up Oscars and directing multimillion-dollar projects but he's very much still one of us, a monster kid *para siempre*.

ANDREA SUBISSATI
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Cover: *Frankenstein*
Design by Shane Mills

We acknowledge the land that *Rue Morgue* is created upon is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

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POST MORTEM

COMMENTS • QUESTIONS • CRITICISM

I MISS SEEING Lon Chaney's face on magazine covers – or anywhere, really. But horror magazine covers especially. Hard to quantify what this man gave the industry – we should be celebrating him so much more. Thanks for your coverage, it was a treat to read.

SAM J, VIA EMAIL

I AM NOT A SUBSCRIBER to your magazine, but I was drawn to your cover story on the return of Alice Cooper. I have been following him since I was a kid and loved him during his horror heyday in the 1980s when he was appearing in movies (anyone remember *Monster Dog*?). Alice was definitely a gateway drug to horror movies for me, and I still follow his music to dark places I normally would not go into. Kudos for the interview and spotlight, it was cool to see him celebrated and loved by your community.

JJJ HIGGINS, VIA EMAIL

I LOVED ALL the *Jaws* hype all around, everywhere, celebrating 50 years. But when that movie came out there were folks celebrating the 50th anniversary of *Phantom of the Opera*! People like us! Can you make reference of that somehow? Chaney shall not die!

KEN BREINER, VIA EMAIL

I ENJOYED YOUR EDITORIAL; you are spot on. As a conservative Christian who loves classic horror, campy horror, and Halloween, I have received so much guff from liberals and stuffy [people] alike. I guess as I got older and wiser I stopped caring who has what to say. I only answer to God. I don't buy into the doom and gloom people push... life is as beautiful (and fun) as you make it. Thank you, *Rue Morgue*, for all the fun wooos, booos, and eeeks! America allows us all to be free without worrying that our T-shirt colour will get us arrested.

EDDIE TWEEDLE, VIA EMAIL

I READ YOUR COVER STORY on the lost horror and made-for-TV films with keen interest. I have vague memories of seeing some of the films you mentioned during my childhood, and reading about them stirred up snatches of memories long gone. It was as if I was catching snippets of my childhood mind on a fuzzy TV set. Needless to say, it was an interesting read for those reasons alone. One film I did not watch (or even hear of) was Steven Spielberg's *Something Evil*. But as that movie appears to still be somewhere in circulation, I have made up my mind to track it down. Thanks, as ever, for your continued commitment to preserving all aspects of the horror genre.

JAY BENSON, VIA EMAIL

YOUR STORY IN *RM#226* about the lost Lon Chaney movie *London After Midnight* sparked a memory. One Sunday kids show [I used to watch] was *Curiosity Shop* featuring Pamelyn Ferdin, a child star from *The Beguiled* and *The Brady Bunch* who starred with two other boys. They performed with singing puppets and taught viewers English and movie trivia. On the show they had a talking TV that showed old silent movies like Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and such. One episode I remember quite well was on Lon Chaney; at the very end, they showed a three- to four-second moving tidbit of *London After Midnight*! A bedroom scene showed a woman in bed with Chaney's vampire next to the bed. As he moved his arms up in the air, bat wings appeared under his armpits. *Curiosity Shop* was a bomb and was on the air for about one year. Question is, does a copy of the movie or movie clip still exist? A film which was lost on August 10, 1965, then aired in the early 1970s? Quite a curiosity indeed!.

DAVID A. ESPINOSA – BELLEVUE, NEBRASKA

*From writer Kelly Robinson: Many monster fans have shared similar stories of seeing a clip around the mid to late '60s, though no one has been able to pinpoint exactly when and where. Interestingly, the memories always seem to involve the scene of Lon Chaney raising his bat-like wings. Some theorize that the memories are actually from some other film (*Dr. Pyckle and Mr. Pryde *is a contender) that jogged people's memories when they later saw a well-circulated still from* LAM*. The episode of* Curiosity Shop *was likely the Halloween episode titled "Where Do You Go to Get Out of a Scare?," written by Ray Bradbury and starring Vincent Price. The episode featured a clip of Lon Chaney in* Phantom of the Opera *and of Vincent Price in* The Abominable Dr. Phibes*, but there's no further information on what other clips might have been shown. Perhaps it was* LAM*, after all. But, with the episodes of* Curiosity Shop *being wiped in the '80s, unless a hidden tape of this episode turns up in a basement somewhere, we can't know for sure…*

RE: *YASMINA TAKES THE YELLOW SICK ROAD to Slime City* on *Rue Morgue TV* – Could you conduct an analysis on the film *Lunch Meat* (1987)? And show off your VHS copy? No one talks or thinks about *Lunch Meat* except me, and likely… you! Awesome show, by the way. Your fan,

JIMMY JAMES, VIA YOUTUBE

RE: *A TRIO OF VINYL FEARS... for Your Ears* on *Rue Morgue TV* – I discovered Ghost through *Rue Morgue* actually. You did an article about the band around 2010 or 2011 when this album was still new. At the time, they seemed so mysterious and kinda scary. They definitely had a mystique about them and that was the most interesting thing about them to me.

@CHADRADFORD2215, VIA YOUTUBE

RE: *TWO CUTS OF CLASSIC HORROR from Alice Cooper and More* on *Rue Morgue TV* – Love your honesty in your reviews! Keep up the good work!

@SCOTT_HALL77, VIA YOUTUBE

RE: *HORROR MUSIC ON LP, Soundtrack, and 7-Inch* on *Rue Morgue TV* – Hey Aaron brother, nice show... I was wondering: When are you gonna do Sacrifyx?

@DOMENTORTHEONLYTRUE, VIA YOUTUBE

RE: *WHAT IS THE TOUGHEST HORROR GAME Andrea Ever Played?* on *Rue Morgue TV* – Thanks for mentioning the NES is 40, way to make me feel old.

@MRFATELURK, VIA YOUTUBE

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LETTERS MAY BE EDITED FOR LENGTH AND/OR CONTENT.

CORONER'S REPORT

WEIRD STATS & MORBID FACTS

ISSUE # 227

Researchers in the Netherlands discovered that watching scary movies releases a blood-clotting protein called Factor VIII, suggesting that horror can literally curdle your blood.

The fictional town of Bailey Downs was the setting for Canadian fright flicks *Ginger Snaps* (2000) and *A Christmas Horror Story* (2015).

Sparkalaphobia is described as the fear of glitter.

Early versions of the 1960 film *Little Shop of Horrors* involving a vampire music critic ("Cardula") and a cannibal chef ("Gluttony") were tossed out due to Hays Code restrictions.

In 2017, 25-year-old Akbar Salubiro was killed and swallowed by a reticulated python in West Sulawesi, Indonesia, in the first fully confirmed case of a snake swallowing an adult human.

During the shooting of *Terrifier 3*, 55 gallons of blood was used with twenty of it being used for the shower scene alone.

A 2008 Colorado State University study showed that the more bumper stickers one has on their car, the more likely they are to be involved in a road rage incident.

The 2022 horror film *Christmas Bloody Christmas* contains 487 swear words, averaging out to 5.6 per minute.

The oddly shaped masks created for the aliens in the 1988 cult classic *Killer Klowns From Outer Space* were later reused in the movie *Ernest Scared Stupid*.

The first episode of the Mike Flanagan Netflix series *The Midnight Club* holds a record with 21 jump scares.

The nightmarish "shaking head" effects in *Jacob's Ladder* were performed in-camera by filming the actor at four frames-per-second. The footage then appeared sped up when played back at the normal rate of 24 fps.

Kix cereal ran a promotion in 1947 where kids could send in fifteen cents and a box top to receive an Atomic Bomb Ring that contained trace amounts of radioactive polonium-210.

Singer Fiona Apple's father is actor Brandon Maggart, who infamously played Harry the killer Santa in 1980's *Christmas Evil*.

COMPILED BY JAY CLARKE
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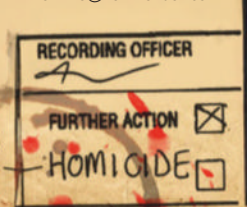

EXPIRING MINDS...

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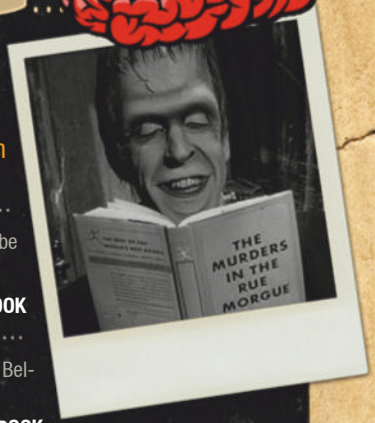

What non-horror book needs a horror movie adaptation and why?

Charlotte's Web, because it would be funny.
DAN HÉBERT, VIA FACEBOOK

Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* from Bella's dad's POV.
DESARÉE CAPLE, VIA FACEBOOK

The Scarlet Letter with a *Rosemary's Baby* twist. I'd like to see Reverend Dimmesdale in league with the Devil.
@BLLYDDPAETWR, VIA INSTAGRAM

Bridget Jones's Diary. The mother's boyfriend treated her so badly he could easily be a serial killer.
@ARDETHBLOOD, VIA INSTAGRAM

Raggedy Ann and Andy go on a killing spree.
ALEISTER DUNWICH, VIA FACEBOOK

FINAL WORDS

AS CAPTIONED BY YOU ON OUR SOCIAL MEDIA

"FREE OF THE STIGMATIZATION OF RABIES, A DECONSTRUCTIONIST *CUJO* CELEBRATES BEING 'DIFFERENT.'"

THIS MONTH'S CAPTION CONTEST WINNER IS
ELLIOTT CLIFTON INGERSOLL, VIA FACEBOOK
Follow us on Facebook, Bluesky, and Instagram for a chance to have your Final Words!

THE SPECTRAL ASSAULT OF DOROTHY BITHER

Sidney J. Furie's 1982 supernatural thriller *The Entity* is a harrowing tale about single mother Carla (Barbara Hershey), who is tormented and sexually assaulted in her home by an invisible being. Beyond the horrific acts themselves, Carla also navigates a sea of skeptical men who believe she's suffering psychosis from repressed sexual desires caused by trauma and… an inclination to masturbate(?). No, this is not a period piece set in the 1800s, but rather a modern-day horror story that pulls inspiration from an actual paranormal investigation that occurred not even ten years prior.

In the 1970s, former actress and screenwriter Thelma Moss ran a laboratory for paranormal studies at UCLA with field investigators Barry Taff and Kerry Gaynor. One day in August 1974, Taff and Gaynor were approached in a bookstore by a woman named Doris Bither, who claimed she'd been attacked by ghosts who threw her against the wall and sexually assaulted her. Taff and Gaynor agreed to visit Bither's home, but their initial investigation was difficult, with the would-be victim visibly depressed and unwilling to share key details about herself. They would have dismissed her claims outright if not for the fact that on their way out, they witnessed a frying pan fly across the kitchen. Subsequent visits included sightings of such supernatural phenomenon as scattered baseball cards, cold spots, and luminous green lights in photographs.

Skeptics of the investigation highlight the fact that, for as much time as Taff and Gaynor spent at Bither's home, they could not produce one piece of substantial recorded evidence or establish a single independent corroborating witness. Despite that, the field investigators maintained the veracity of the events while also cashing in on media interviews and book deals even though their work with Moss' lab ended when it closed in 1978.

Bither's "true" story provides an interesting contrast to her cinematic counterpart in *The Entity*. In the film, supernatural forces are real and the audience experiences Carla's trauma from her perspective, so it's frustrating to see her be dismissed by stuffy male doctors. But skepticism takes on a different flavour in the real world, where one has to seriously question the motives of men like Taff and Gaynor who, by acting in their own self-interest, prevented a woman who may have needed a psychologist or social worker from accessing that kind of help.

To make matters worse, even though the investigators hold steadfast to their claims that something supernatural stalked the Bither household, they both dismissed the sexual assault element of her story and asserted that the incidents were caused by a poltergeist that stemmed from Bither herself. Moral of the story: even when people want to believe, they still don't believe women.

BRYAN CHRISTOPHER

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...

Ronald Mlodzik, "Mr. Merrick" from *Shivers* (1975)

An early member of David Cronenberg's returning cast, Ron Mlodzik appeared in 1970's *Crimes of the Future* (as the enigmatically attired Adrian Tripod) and 1969's *Stereo* while studying at Massey College, University of Toronto. Portraying the ill-fated building manager Mr. Merrick, *Shivers* marked the pair's third collaboration, before Mlodzik's much smaller role in 1977's *Rabid*. Contrary to his friend's well-known atheism, Mlodzik is an Orthodox Catholic, and the Church was to be his calling, in spite of his evident acting talent. Following his stint working with Canada's horror auteur, he taught English and Creative Arts at Champlain College, Quebec, and became a subdeacon in the Archdiocese of Canada in 1989. Subsequently retiring from education in the early 2000s, he was ordained as an archdeacon in August of 2002. Described by Cronenberg as possessing a "medieval gay sensibility," Mlodzik has featured prominently in LGBTQ+ analyses of the director's work – his performance as Mr. Merrick, in particular.

LOUIS FLETCHER

NEEDFUL THINGS

1 HORROR PUNK BUTTON-UP

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The perfect button-up for *Rue Morgue* readers doesn't exist? Think again! Future Monsters had ghouls like you in mind when it came up with this all-over print featuring a carefully curated collage of vintage punk and horror magazine clippings. This unisex black-and-white shirt is made in soft, lightweight viscose and features engraved buttons for maximum cool. Wear your horror love on your sleeve – literally!

Futuremonsters.com

2 DREADMAS SEASONAL ORNAMENTS

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You might know the Mysterious Package Company for its top-notch murder mystery tabletop games, but this season marks the launch of a new line of "Dreadmas" holiday decor designed to spread fear, not cheer! Dubbed "The Dark Choir," the three resin ornaments in this set are 10cm in height but at least forty feet in creep factor. What's coming next in the Dreadmas line remains a mystery…

Mysteriouspackage.com

3 *A CREEPY KRAMPUS COLORING BOOK*

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HANDMADE HORRORS

WICKED WALL ART BY SHAUN WILLIAM STANGER

Is there anything humans fear more than death? The definitive end of life itself, it's the threshold that separates our reasoned existence from the unknowable space beyond the veil. Tarot enthusiasts, however, take a slightly different view; pulling the Death card, for example, foretells a potentially painful transformation, the loss of comfort and predictability or entrance into a cruel new world. UK-based sculptor Shaun William Stanger of SWS Wall Art takes inspiration from the art of these popular divination decks for his black-and-gold wall plaques, which add spooky occult elegance to any decor.

"From a very young age I was drawn to the mystical and esoteric," he tells *Rue Morgue*, adding that a nearby Viking cathedral with old, stone-carved memorial death plaques provides constant inspiration. "I would buy fantasy books to obsess over the artwork on the front cover and never actually read the book. I always wanted there to be something supernatural in the world. My older sister was very much the same and she dabbled with a Rider Waite Smith Tarot Deck."

Stanger was once a stone mason and builder himself, before a repetitive injury caused him to leave the field and get into sculpting with clay rather than stone. His preferred medium is now Monster Clay, a reusable wax-like substance that won't dry out and is frequently utilized in horror movie special effects. From there, he makes a silicone mould of the finished design to be cast in plaster and then painted with acrylic and gilding wax to achieve a distressed look.

"I hand paint each piece to a high standard, which ensures they are all unique," he says. "Then I spray finish them with a crystal-clear matte topcoat for protection and durability."

A lifelong genre fan and classic metal aficionado (the album art of Slayer, Sepultura, and Pantera inform the bulk of his work), Stanger's shop offers carved plaques of such macabre figures as skeletons, ghosts, serpents, and anatomical hearts – anything spooky is fair game, and holiday gift-buyers can even include personalized text attached to the back of the artwork.

"I love tattoo art and illustrations from 19th-century magazines and books," he says. "All things amazing, weird, and very dark."

Visit SWS Wall Art at etsy.com/ca/shop/SWS-wallart.

JENN ADAMS

CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES

MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN

(Delacorte Press, 1980, 1981)

For monster fans too young to pore over an unabridged edition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, New York-based Delacorte Press published a beautifully illustrated children's book that was a staple of schools and libraries in the early 1980s. Adapted and illustrated by the wife and husband team of Alice and Joel Schick, the book (originally issued as a hardcover edition in 1980, before being reprinted the following year in a softcover version) covers all the major plot points of Shelley's classic and, despite including portions of text from the original 1818 novel, is very accessible for younger readers. The fantastic watercolour painted panels by award-winning artist Joel (who worked for years as an illustrator for children's publications and books) perfectly capture the essence of the driven young scientist and his rejected, misunderstood creation. The couple also adapted and illustrated a companion volume, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, released by Delacorte. Copies of the book can usually be found on eBay for between $25 and $45.

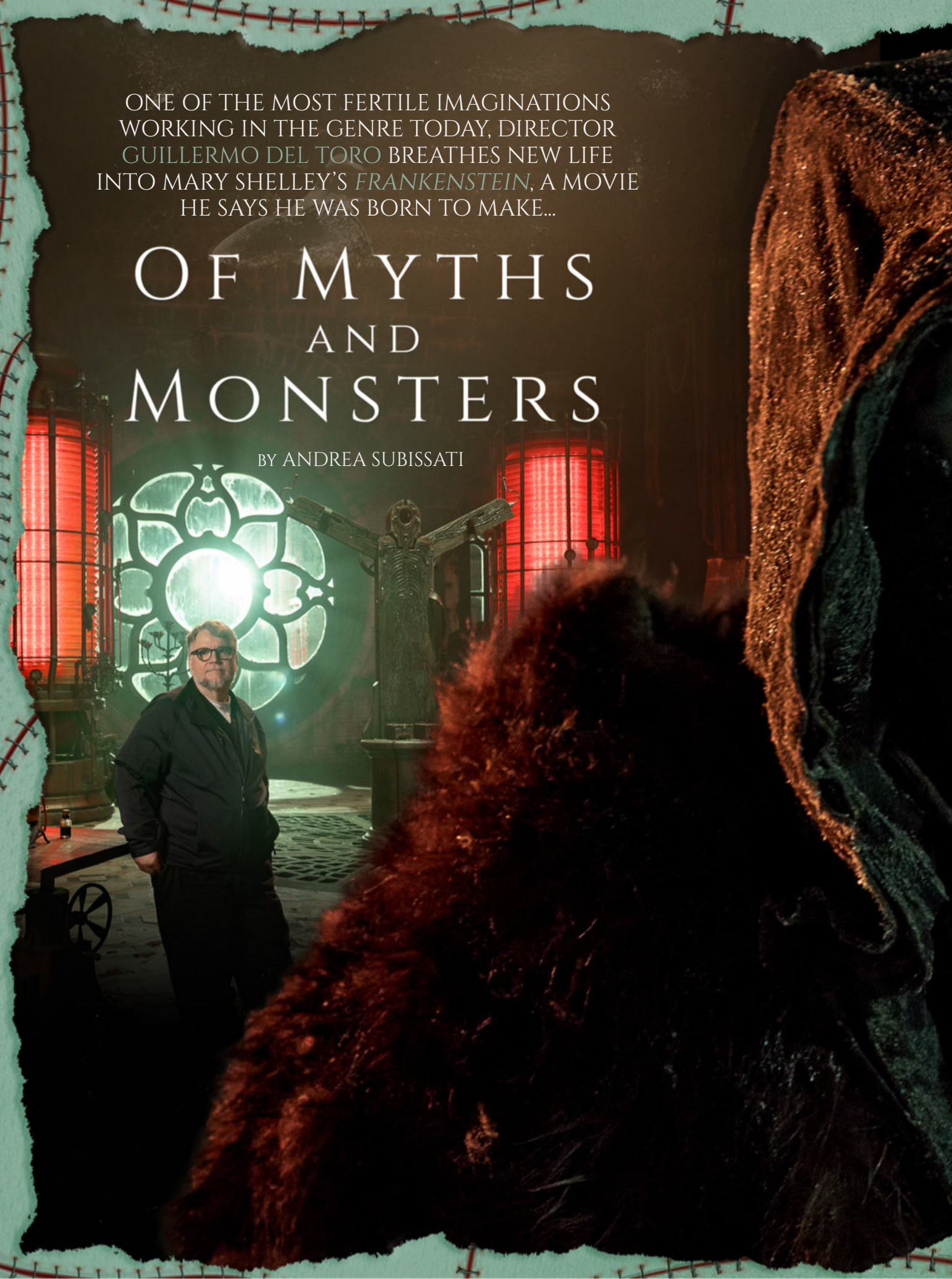
JAMES BURRELL

MORE CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES AT RUE-MORGUE.COM

ONE OF THE MOST FERTILE IMAGINATIONS WORKING IN THE GENRE TODAY, DIRECTOR GUILLERMO DEL TORO BREATHES NEW LIFE INTO MARY SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN*, A MOVIE HE SAYS HE WAS BORN TO MAKE...

OF MYTHS AND MONSTERS

BY ANDREA SUBISSATI



ONE NEEDN'T BE A HARDENED HORROR FAN TO APPRECIATE THE UBIQUITY OF MARY SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN*. BEFORE HE became the stuff of kids' Halloween costumes, Victor Frankenstein's clumsy creation was rendered to celluloid in 1931 in a film starring Boris Karloff, whose portrayal of the monster, assisted by famed Universal monster-maker Jack Pierce, cemented the image of a heavy-lidded, bolt-necked, broad-browed giant into the public consciousness, laying the foundation for one of horror's most iconic figures. That portrayal also blew the mind of one Mexican filmmaker-to-be, a man who would go on to dominate the film industry as one of the genre's most dazzling dreamers: Guillermo del Toro.

Garnering international acclaim for his Spanish language independent features before grappling with Miramax for a famously miserable Hollywood production, del Toro has since become a veritable cinematic Renaissance man – an intellectual polymath whose meteoric rise to fame includes more awards and accolades than we have space to list. According to the maestro, a cinematic adaptation of *Frankenstein* was always at the top of his bucket list, a project so dauntingly close to his heart that he dared not attempt it… until now. But don't look to del Toro's *Frankenstein* to be a mere retelling of the story we've come to know and love.

While equally grand in scale to Kenneth Branagh's 1994 epic, del Toro's take paints a darker portrait of the eponymous mad scientist, starting from an unhappy childhood, marred by his abusive, perfectionist father whom he blames for being unable to save his mother when she dies giving birth to his brother William. From that sour soil, Victor (Oscar Isaac) emerges into adulthood a surgeon – as arrogant as he is skilled, and less motivated to move the needle of science than he is desperate to prove himself worthy to a patriarch whose approval he can never obtain. Thus, upon seeing his creation (Jacob Elordi) come alive, Victor is horrified to find him so childlike and needy that he opts to slash and burn the whole operation rather than nurture the life he's fashioned. At this point, del Toro's *Frankenstein* shifts to the creature's perspective, tracing his journey from curiosity to confusion as to why he's been so cruelly abandoned by his maker.

This is where the film deviates most from the popular understanding of the parable. In early press, the director went on record as saying he didn't consider his *Frankenstein* to be a horror film, a statement which undoubtedly bewildered fans who have come to expect certain consistencies from the filmmaker: stunning practical gore effects, astonishing cruelty from human characters, and an acute gift for granting misunderstood monsters their time to shine and be understood. *Frankenstein* is a story about an angry monster stitched together from bits of corpses and unleashed upon the world; how could it be anything other than a horror movie?

But del Toro's perspective on the story is different, informed by decades of devouring every bit of source material he could find. Certainly his "monster" is sympathetic, and humanity doesn't exactly win him over by consistently despising him upon sight, but his creature – sensitive, innocent, self-educated in philosophy and the humanities – has more on his mind than crushing skulls and taking names. In del Toro's version, his journey is one of compassion, forgiveness, and empathy: sentimental features of the Romanticism movement that informed the most subversive elements of Shelley's original text. This crucial context – he explained to me as we discussed the film following its premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival – is not only critical to the story's narrative power, but a testament to its young author's courage, brilliance, and strength of character.

> "EVERY PERSON IS BORN WITH ONE OR TWO SONGS THAT THEY KNOW THEY CAN SING, AND WHEN THEY ARE SUNG BY THAT PERSON, THEY ARE RENEWED. THIS IS THE SONG I WAS BORN TO SING."
>
> **– GUILLERMO DEL TORO**

Throughout our conversation, del Toro kept referring to the story of *Frankenstein* as a myth rather than a text or a novel, a detail that struck me as significant. A myth is a tall tale that may or may not be true but retains its literary value in the wisdom it imparts about the state of the natural universe, and this understanding is precisely why the project loomed so large over his illustrious career – and indeed, his entire life. *Frankenstein* isn't just a story to Guillermo del Toro, it's a paradigm; an ideology that seized his mind at a formative age and altered his perspective, seeping into every story he's told since.

His voice is thick with reverence when he speaks of *Frankenstein* – the 1931 film, the 1818 book and its self-assured teenage creator (see sidebar p.15), but he's not here to tell her story, or anyone else's. Del Toro's *Frankenstein* is his version, the result of his own lifetime of seeing the world through the eyes of a boy obsessed with death, a man driven to cruelty, and a monster who learns to forgive.

"*FRANKENSTEIN*... IS MY BIOGRAPHY."

– GUILLERMO DEL TORO

From Boris To Byron: *Del Toro's vision of* ***Frankenstein*** *is the result of a lifelong obsession that took him through every iteration of the story, literary and cinematic, throughout the course of his life.*

***I want to start with how you understand the source material, and what you felt was missing from previous film adaptations of* Frankenstein.**

You cannot build from negatives. What happened was, I saw the first movie from 1931 when I was seven and it struck me like a religious moment. When Boris [Karloff] closed the threshold, I finally understood the Catholic fervour that my grandmother used to talk about. I saw a saint, I saw a messiah. "This is me. That's how I feel inside, like the creature." And then I read the book at eleven, and I went, "Wait a minute, that's not in the movie." The book is something completely separate. Most *Frankenstein* movies are riffs on the myth, or the first movie from 1931, but they rarely addressed the book, very rarely. And so I felt, "Well, there's so much [more] to tell." The only version I thought was faithful to the spirit of the book was not faithful to the book at all, which was the two-part movie *Frankenstein: The True Story*, which is phenomenal. I loved the late Christopher Isherwood, but it didn't take barely anything from the novel. So I thought, okay, I've read through the decades, I read every book about Mary Shelley, about the Romantics, about Percy, Byron, Polidori, the movement, how [*Frankenstein* was] affected by the age of reason and the Napoleonic Wars, blah blah blah. It's all in my DNA. I've read all the edits. I've read the three official versions of the novel. I've read the manuscript! Every person is born with one or two songs that they know they can sing, and when they are sung by that person they are renewed. This is the song I was born to sing.

So, you resonated just as strongly with the book as you did with the film, even though they were different?

More so.

In what way?

Because somewhere [inside me], there is a nineteen-year-old girl from the UK, there's something very similar to the spirit of the Brontës or the spirit of Shelley. There's something that I just feel – when people say "Romantic," they imagine Fabio carrying a heroine in his arms. For me, Romantic is a hardcore stance because you know the world can be terrible and beautiful and absolutely brutal and yet you choose to say, "I believe in a world where beauty and horror, love and death can coexist." Something basic in the Romantic myth [is that] the real enemy is life. It's not a namby-pamby swooning, that attitude is actually very punk. I feel like that. I did sort of the same process with *Pinocchio*. I said, "Am I gonna retell *Pinocchio* the way [author Carlo] Collodi did it?" I can't, because I am not that guy, in favour of the unification of the Italian kingdoms into a single Republic. But I can take some of the Christian Hermeticism that Collodi was attracted to and I can do it through that, and talk about fascism. So, is it true to the spirit of *Pinocchio*? Yes, it is, but it's very different. It's the same [with *Frankenstein*]; this is my biography. It is me as a son and me as a father, trying to figure out forgiveness and forgiving oneself into existence. So, it's a very personal movie because, at this point, all that I understand about the myth is in me.

I want to talk more about forgiveness. The ending to your film is perhaps the biggest departure from the traditional* Frankenstein *story. Did you have any apprehensions about tweaking the source material like that?

You can't have apprehensions and create. What I say today is, adapting a book is like marrying a widow. You have to respect the memory of the late husband but on Saturdays, you gotta rock on.

You always have the best metaphors.

But it works! You can't be timid and dance, right? Art is a dance, you have to be completely fearless and just go in, get out there and boogie.

That said, you did hesitate to make this movie.

You're right, I hesitated. I did say, "Am I ready?" and I chickened out. But that decision was easy because nobody would give me the money. When people were interested, I always said "I wanna do a he said/she said [format of presenting different viewpoints], I want to do the creature and the creator." And they would say, "That's a good idea, how much?" And I would say, [gestures] "Boom." And they would say, "No, if we do it, we'd risk too much." I knew it had to be an epic for it to land.

So, was it just a question of money? Or are there other reasons why now is the right time?

The plausible reason is money. But the reason,

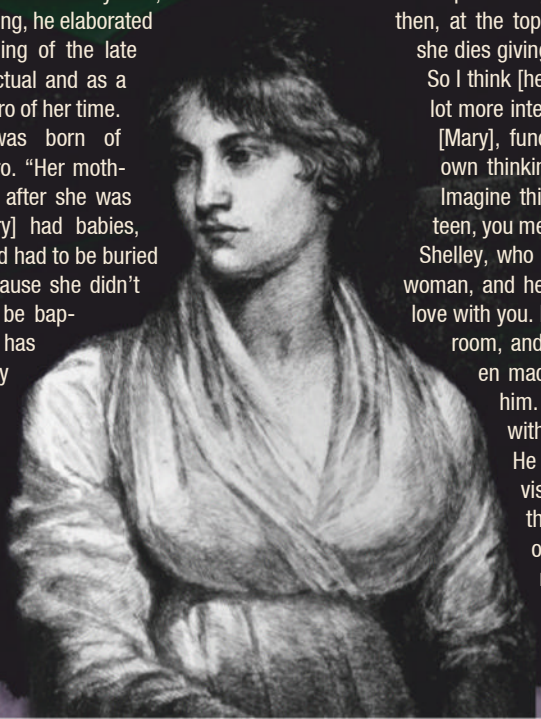
GUILLERMO DEL TORO REFLECTS ON THE FIERCE WOMEN BEHIND THE CREATURE HE CAME TO LOVE; NINETEEN-YEAR-OLD MARY SHELLEY AND HER FOREBEAR, MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

MOTHER FRANKENSTEIN

BY ANDREA SUBISSATI

Much has been made of the fact that Mary Shelley's classic gothic novel came from the imagination of an outspoken teenage girl on a dark and spooky night. Less known is that Shelley had an especially fraught relationship with motherhood, having lost her own mother (writer and activist Mary Wollstonecraft) at a young age and, later, two of her own three children. During my conversation with Guillermo del Toro, discussion inevitably turned toward Shelley and, in response to my probing, he elaborated his own understanding of the late author as an intellectual and as a creative, and as a hero of her time.

"Mary Shelley was born of death," says del Toro. "Her mother died eleven days after she was birthed. When [Mary] had babies, the first baby she had had to be buried without a name because she didn't live long enough to be baptized. After that, she has miscarriages, early infant deaths, and she links fertility with two things: loss and death. There's a fusion of birth and death. That's why, when I was writing a prologue for one of the *Frankenstein* editions, I said that she understands that the true enemy is life. That's the enemy, that's the antagonist: life. Which is a very Romantic position.



"Her mother was a very articulate feminist," he continues. "She experienced the French Revolution, she was a fighter and a woman that very boldly defied the ways society constrained the role of women to, basically, objects of beauty, objects of motherhood, and objects of contempt as they got old. And then, at the top of her power, she dies giving birth to Mary. So I think [her activism is] a lot more internal. But as for [Mary], functioning as her own thinking self… fuck. Imagine this, you are sixteen, you meet a guy, Percy Shelley, who is married to a woman, and he falls madly in love with you. He runs to your room, and you have fallen madly in love with him. He's friends with your father. He is barred from visiting you when the father finds out that a married man is courting his daughter. He goes to your room with a bottle of laudanum and a gun and says, 'Drink the laudanum and I'll blow my brains out and we will be together forever.' And then she says, 'Calm down,' but they elope at five in the morning, cross the English Channel into France. Her stepmother catches up with them, and [Mary] says, 'Screw you, I'm staying with him.' That, to me, is a pretty hardcore position as a female in the early 1800s. It is clearly explained to Mary that she's going to be a pariah, that she is going to lose all status, that everybody's going to hate her, and everybody's going to shun her. And she goes, 'So fucking what?' I think she, by action and definition and as the daughter of a feminist, has a really clear definition of what she wants.

"Then she experienced tragedy after tragedy after tragedy; the suicide of her stepsister, the suicide of Shelley's [first] wife because of their love, and she sees the families not claiming the bodies because claiming the bodies gives them a name, and they have to [bury] them anonymously because they are suicides and they didn't want the stain [on their name]. She experiences all of this, she has regret. She experiences all of these things, not in chronological order, but when she writes *Frankenstein*, she has already experienced a lot of passion and a lot of love. She's a hero, my hero. I mean, at sixteen, I was trying to buy illegal beer. That was my defiance."

"I'M GOING TO MAKE A JOYOUS WALTZ OF BLOOD AND PIECES BEING PUT TOGETHER AND IT'S NOT GOING TO BE SEEN AS A HORROR MOMENT WITH THUNDER AND BLOOD DRIPPING. IT'S GOING TO BE DONE WITH JOY."

– GUILLERMO DEL TORO

existentially, is I grew up believing that I needed to talk about me and my dad, and I was [too] busy being a son that I didn't figure out that I was already a father. And that hit me, during the teenage years, and then the loss of my dad, and realizing, "I'm never going to have a perfect story as a son, can I make a great story as a father?" And for that to work, you need forgiveness. I'm just offering… not wisdom, not advice, but experience, which is the second duty of poetry or art – to share experience.

I really loved your remarks last night about the Romanticism movement as being rebellious, and the resistance inherent in bringing emotion back into art, pushing back from the Enlightenment. Because another hallmark of the Enlightenment was the banishment of monsters, because we couldn't understand them.

Anything that existed in the universe, we thought we could explain. And the beauty of art is to enshrine the mystery, right? I don't want an explanation, I want an understanding, which is very different. You understand something and if it's beyond words, that means you're having a deep understanding. It's very different to me, to feel emotion than to be emotional. It's very different. To be emotional is to be sentimental, but to have emotion is to *feel.* It's a hardcore attitude.

You also mentioned resonating with Lord Byron in not being afraid to use shock in art. How did you incorporate that sentiment into the film?

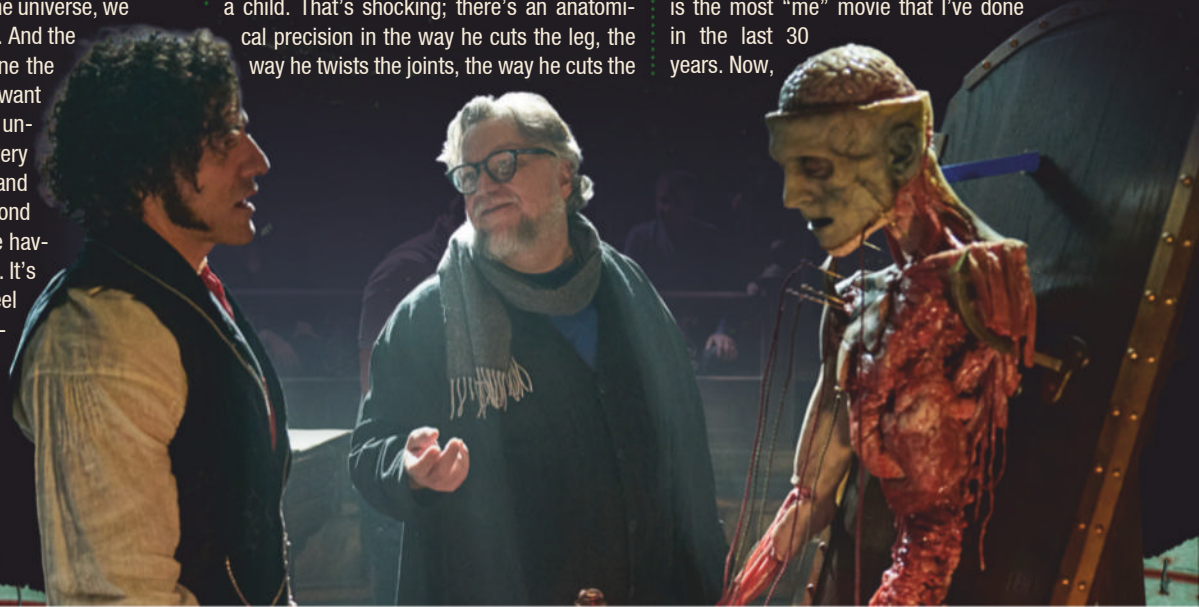
I tried to show moments that have not been shown ever in any other vision of the myth. One salient thing is [in most adaptations] the putting together of the corpses is done with a tasteful shot, or you see the monster bandaged and that's it. I said, "I'm going to make a joyous waltz of blood and pieces being put together and it's not going to be seen as a horror moment with thunder and blood dripping. It's going to be done with joy." Imagine somebody that wants to do a concert all his life; well, this is the moment he does the concert. So, it's a waltz, and he's happy, and [Victor] sees his childhood dream in the ivory Venus and he looks at the monster and he finally did it, he did what he's been dreaming of since he was a child. That's shocking; there's an anatomical precision in the way he cuts the leg, the way he twists the joints, the way he cuts the knee, it is very anatomically brutal but it makes you realize, "I haven't seen this."

Is that how you felt after seeing the movie? Like you were watching your waltz?

The funny thing is, in that scene – I was joking with Oscar when we were doing that – I said, "I think I'm method directing," because I felt really woozy and dizzy. Something changed that I have not put into words, but it never came back. I'm not the same person after [shooting] that scene, precisely that scene, and I don't know what it is. I cannot explain it.

You've likened your feelings about the film to something like postpartum.

It is possible, I may have. I have an emptiness that feels good. It feels bad, but it feels good to feel like this. [I feel like I'm] less than twenty; I've got to find a new way of doing things. This is the most "me" movie that I've done in the last 30 years. Now,



FX WIZARD MIKE HILL BRINGS GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S LUMBERING CREATURE TO LIFE... AND UNDEATH

MAKING A MONSTER

BY JAMES BURRELL

Though his name may not be as recognizable as Rick Baker or Tom Savini, Mike Hill is an FX veteran who's been creating monsters across various mediums for over 30 years. The UK-born sculptor and makeup effects artist – who specializes in portraiture sculpture and is known for making highly detailed model kits and amazingly lifelike figures of classic horror characters – is a frequent collaborator of Guillermo del Toro, and the man behind Victor Frankenstein's creation in the director's epic new take on Mary Shelley's classic.

"It was over three years ago when [Guillermo] met with me and asked if I wanted to do it," recalls Hill from his makeup FX studio in Los Angeles. "I met with him and producer J. Miles Dale for breakfast, and Guillermo said, 'Listen, we're doing *Frankenstein* and I want you to build the creature. And I'm telling you right now, if you say no, I'm not doing the movie. So, it all depends on you.' And I said, 'Well, of course I'll do it!'"

After creating a body cast and doing a makeup test on actor Andrew Garfield, however, Hill was informed by del Toro that the actor had exited the project, and did Hill have any suggestions for a replacement. He was stumped, until he happened to see the 6'5" Jacob Elordi in an interview.

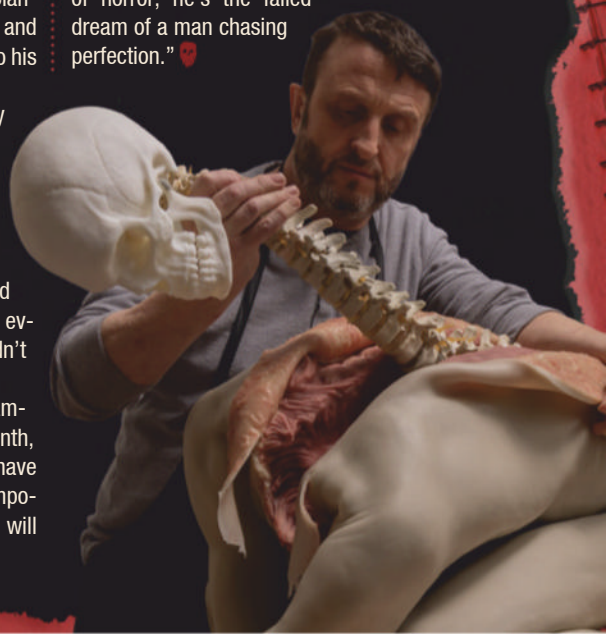
"I looked at his physique, his [air of] innocence, his heavy eyelids – like Karloff's – with the long lashes," he says. "I texted Guillermo and told him, 'This is our man, this is who we should get.'"

Hill and del Toro's creature will inevitably draw comparisons to previous versions of the monster which, in addition to Karloff's role in the Universal classics, include portrayals by Christopher Lee, Michael Sarrazin, Clancy Brown, Robert De Niro, Rory Kinnear, and others. None of them, however, figured into his and del Toro's vision.

"I went out of my way not to look at any past versions," says Hill. "The makeup I designed was the result of months of careful planning. This creature had to feel new but still rooted in history. He's not a modern monster; he's a product of his time. So, I needed something that looked like [he] stepped out of the late 1700s. And everybody does the crude stitching, so I didn't want to do that. I just wanted clean lines."

The result of his painstaking work shambles into theatres and home video this month, joining a long line of predecessors who have built on Mary Shelley's creation for contemporary audiences. Hill expects that viewers will take to del Toro's iteration.

"As you know, the story of Victor Frankenstein is that he isn't trying to make a monster, he's trying to make something beautiful," says Hill. "But he fails, and this is what he has to show. So, the creature bears the marks of crude surgery: incision lines, stitching, and desperate corrections. He's like a patchwork; he's imperfect and scarred, but he's not evil. Above all, the creature is not ugly for the sake of horror; he's the failed dream of a man chasing perfection."



I've got to be someone else. I was talking with David Cronenberg many years ago, right before he did *A History of Violence*, and he said, "You have to shove yourself back into wanting things you're afraid of." He said, "You have to put up a new horizon." And then he did *A History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises*.

Now that that piece of you is gone, are you still motivated? Do you have more stories to tell?

Well, I have questions. When you're young, you're very hungry, you're really eager to shout the questions. And then when you're older, you start living with regret and things not done and the tenor of the questions changes. I'm in that era; I'm figuring out the things I've done and the things I haven't done and they all feel equally important. It hits you after 50.

It's what you said before, that you're born into innocence, and then you figure out whether you feel like the world is hostile or not...

And it isn't, by the way. I think you feel [hostility] when you use words that are very dangerous, when you ask questions like, "Why me?" The real question is, "Why not?" Like, "I got a kidney disease." "Okay, well, why not? You have a kidney. It can get diseased. What is extraordinary about it? That it's you?" It's all driven by ego. And the older you get, the more the ego drops, and then your questions become a little more… sombre, with more contentment about the world. And then you figure out what the movie says, which is that the heart will break and get broken and you live on.

I'm interested to know if your attitude toward horror as a genre has changed. Having made this movie, having turned that turning point at age 60, how does that reconcile with your attitude of "Why not"?

Well, I think that when we talk about a genre… comedy is the easiest example. Comedy can be a magnificent fart epic, like *Dumb and Dumber*, or it can be a profound meditation on existence like *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. You know, that's the latitude and we don't often give the same latitude to horror. There is a sanctioned territory now that is horror art or art horror, there are the wild bushes of B-horror movies which are always fruitful and crazy, and then there is horror as an industrial product. But there are so many latitudes. When I see movies like *Weapons*, I am scared, I'm amazed at the filmmaking, I am renewed in my faith. I see *Sinners*, I feel the same way. Or I see [Robert] Eggers' or Ari Aster's [films]… it depends on the moment, but you can see people trying things that are very exhilarating. I love the audiovisual vocabulary of horror, but only a few times have I been interested in doing an actual horror movie. *Mimic*, I would say, is sci-fi horror and very pointedly so. *Blade* is action horror, very pointedly so. The rest… I don't think they're horror, they're just something weird. I adore horror.

I think* Frankenstein*'s such an interesting example of that, because I'm being asked if it's a horror movie but, to me, a* Frankenstein *movie always is, just by its very nature.

It's a family melodrama, which generically would correspond to horror because, of course, it has bodies, a man is constructed, he resur-

THE OFFICIAL COMPANION BOOK TO GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S *FRANKENSTEIN* IS A BEAUTIFUL BEAST

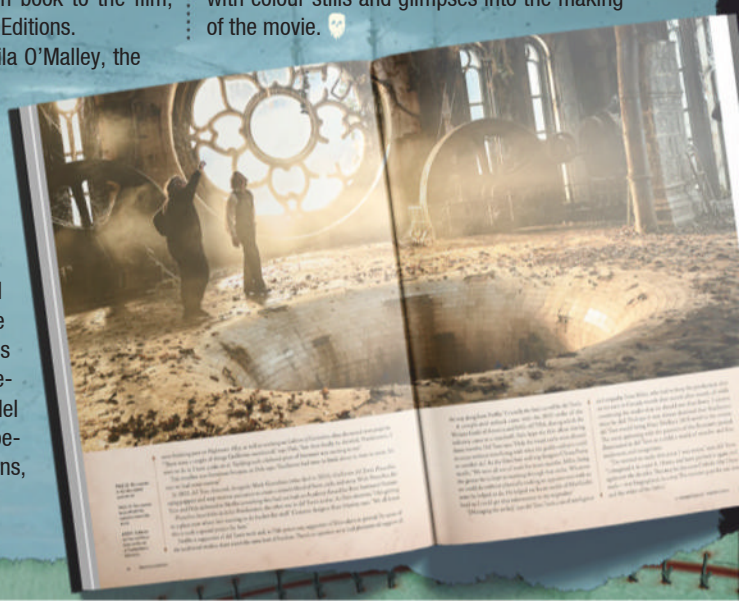
MONSTER ART

BY BENOIT BLACK

You don't have to go on set to a Guillermo del Toro movie to know the man has turned cinema into high art – just look at the resulting movie, awash in exquisite visuals, unforgettable creatures, and a colour palette that will warm your soul. For those looking to go beyond the screen, there is *The Art & Making of Frankenstein: Written & Directed by Guillermo del Toro*, the official companion book to the film, out this month from Insight Editions.

Written by film critic Sheila O'Malley, the impressive tome lumbers in a 9.25" x 12.75" hardcover with 264 pages and throws open a window into del Toro's creative process and the meticulous craftsmanship with which he resurrected Mary Shelley's novel for the screen. The hefty volume is compiled of extensive behind-the-scenes images, del Toro's unique concept art, period-specific props, locations, costumes, and a deep dive into his filmmaking process.

Connoisseurs take note: Insight is also releasing two Collector's Editions of the book, *Frankenstein: Portfolio Edition* and *Frankenstein: Artifact Edition*, along with *Frankenstein: The Complete Screenplay*, the latter a deluxe edition featuring the full screenplay, complete with colour stills and glimpses into the making of the movie.



rects. Within every tale, there's the genre they belong to and then the literary tradition they can run into. Back in the Victorian era, they used [the term] "sensation novels." Nobody was saying "horror," there was not that hardcore approach, but there was graveyard poetry which was part of the Romantic language, and the incorporation of the engravings of [Neoclassical Italian archeologist] Giovanni Battista Piranesi into the language. There was not necessarily this creating a series of clichés that define a genre. The same thing happened with film noir. Film noir came out of the disillusionment of the big cities and capitalism and war. Nobody said, "Let's use a fedora and some fucking diagonal light from the [blinds]," but it became that. And horror, the more you understand its roots, the more you can trace it back to Caliban in *The Tempest*, or Nathaniel Hawthorne, or Ambrose Bierce, or whatever you want, the more complete and more comfortable you feel with it.

Going back to the idea that the horror of* Frankenstein *hinges on the appearance of the monster, can you talk a bit about your concept for the creature? I got the sense that he was almost sculpted out of stone, almost like there was a* Pygmalian *aspect to it.
You are 100 percent right. If you see the last ten minutes of *Cronos* or the first four minutes of the opening, I was already rehearsing that there. It's a look that I wanted for *Frankenstein* from the beginning. The way I described it in *Cronos*, in the screenplay, says "I'm a pale man, fractured, the colour of marble and moonlight." I thought it was a very Romantic construction because most of the time, the creature is almost like an ICU accident victim, with huge stitches, all badly put together. And you think, "Is Victor Frankenstein that sloppy?"

I thought he was a good surgeon!
I thought he was an artist and good surgeon that got admired! So I said, "I want to make it look like two things: the head should look like a phrenology diagram from the 1800s, and then the body needs to look like an anatomical alabaster sculpture."

"ADAPTING A BOOK IS LIKE MARRYING A WIDOW. YOU HAVE TO RESPECT THE MEMORY OF THE LATE HUSBAND BUT, ON SATURDAYS, YOU GOTTA ROCK ON."

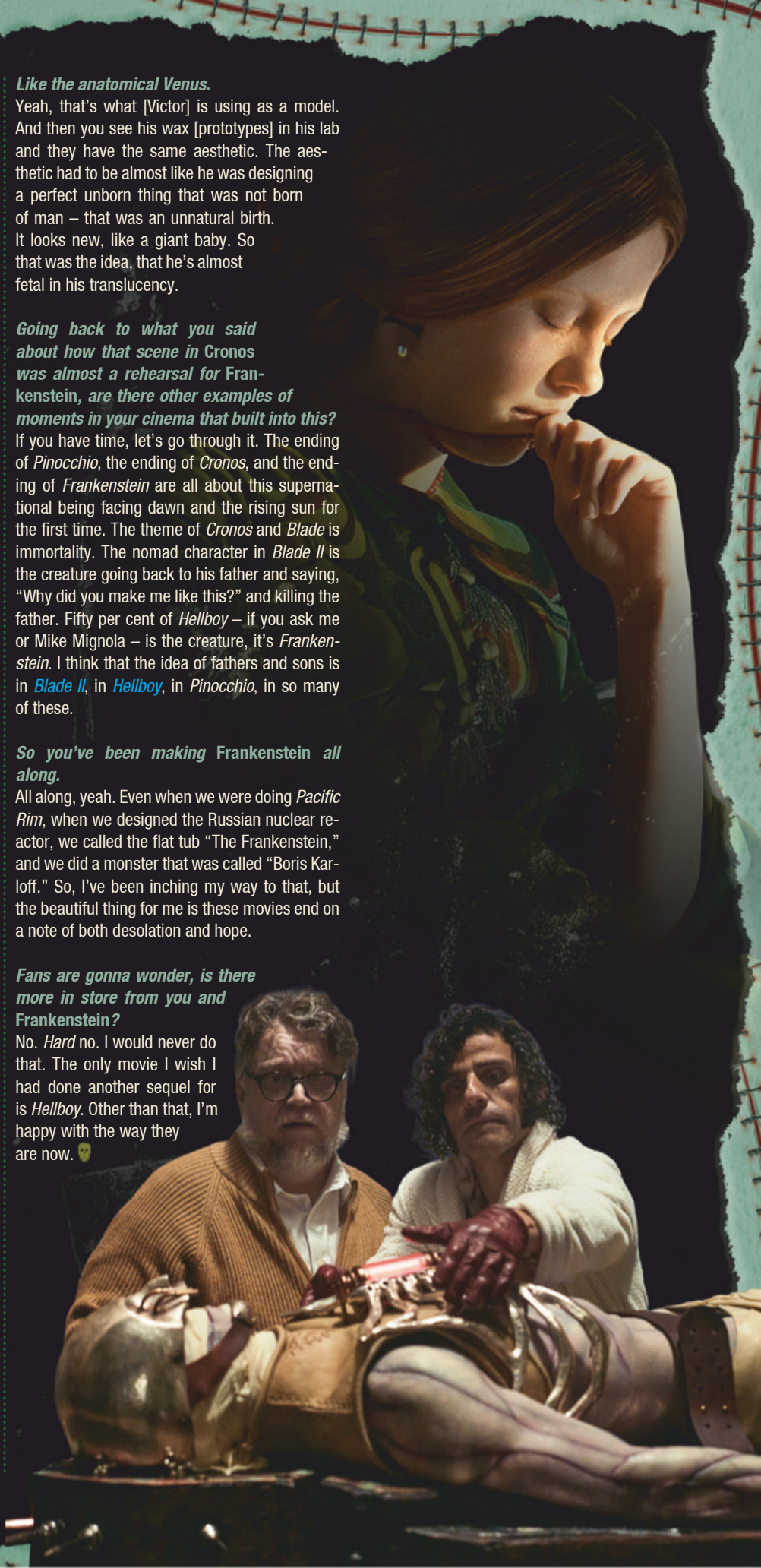
– GUILLERMO DEL TORO

Like the anatomical Venus.
Yeah, that's what [Victor] is using as a model. And then you see his wax [prototypes] in his lab and they have the same aesthetic. The aesthetic had to be almost like he was designing a perfect unborn thing that was not born of man – that was an unnatural birth. It looks new, like a giant baby. So that was the idea, that he's almost fetal in his translucency.

Going back to what you said about how that scene in* Cronos *was almost a rehearsal for* Frankenstein*, are there other examples of moments in your cinema that built into this?
If you have time, let's go through it. The ending of *Pinocchio*, the ending of *Cronos*, and the ending of *Frankenstein* are all about this supernational being facing dawn and the rising sun for the first time. The theme of *Cronos* and *Blade* is immortality. The nomad character in *Blade II* is the creature going back to his father and saying, "Why did you make me like this?" and killing the father. Fifty per cent of *Hellboy* – if you ask me or Mike Mignola – is the creature, it's *Frankenstein*. I think that the idea of fathers and sons is in *Blade II*, in *Hellboy*, in *Pinocchio*, in so many of these.

So you've been making* Frankenstein *all along.
All along, yeah. Even when we were doing *Pacific Rim*, when we designed the Russian nuclear reactor, we called the flat tub "The Frankenstein," and we did a monster that was called "Boris Karloff." So, I've been inching my way to that, but the beautiful thing for me is these movies end on a note of both desolation and hope.

Fans are gonna wonder, is there more in store from you and* Frankenstein*?
No. *Hard* no. I would never do that. The only movie I wish I had done another sequel for is *Hellboy*. Other than that, I'm happy with the way they are now.



THE BOULET BROTHERS TEAM UP WITH ACTOR/WRITER DAVID DASTMALCHIAN TO BRING YOU *THE BOULET BROTHERS' HOLIDAY OF HORRORS*, THEIR FOUR-STORY ANTHOLOGY HORROR FILM, JUST IN TIME FOR THE YULETIDE SEASON!

SEASON'S GRIEVINGS

BY SEAN PLUMMER

INTERVIEWS BY ROCCO T. THOMPSON AND ANDREA SUBISSATI

A Very Boulet Christmas: *(from left) Swanthula Boulet, David Dastmalchian and Dracmorda Boulet share directorial and hosting duties for an all-new holiday horror anthology special this season.*

IF THEY WERE TO PICK ANY HOLIDAY IN WHICH TO SET THEIR NEW ANTHOLOGY SPECIAL, YOU MAY HAVE EXPECTED DRACMORDA AND Swanthula Boulet – a.k.a. The Boulet Brothers – to pick Halloween. After all, the horror drag superstars are best known for their Shudder reality competition show *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula*, where creepy (and catty) drag artists from around the world compete to be named the "World's Next Drag Supermonster" by executing all manner of spooky and sexy looks and surviving some truly ghastly challenges should they fall short of expectations. Instead, *The Boulet Brothers' Holiday of Horrors*, out this December on Shudder, promises to be a big ol' gift-wrapped box of yuletide scariness stuffed under your tacky tinsel Xmas tree.

"I think Christmas is scary, even as a kid," explains Dracmorda Boulet. "Everything's dark at night and there's these lights and everything's soft lit. It just looks creepy, especially if there's snow involved. I feel like the snow at night in a neighbourhood just lays a creepiness over everything. It kind of muffles sound and if nobody's around, it's the perfect setting for a horror movie. I like the idea of Christmas being so good and happy and joyous and cute and all that, and just flipping it and presenting it in a completely opposite direction."

That direction is unveiled in a selection of tales aimed at adding blood and gore to the season of celebration, giving, hope, and sharing.

Notes Swanthula: "We're taking something so wholesome and kind of true-hearted Americana, that period of the year, and just sort of twisting it and putting it on its head and subverting it into something scary and maybe not what people associate with it. We're really inspired by that kind of thing; it was a natural gravitation toward the holidays."

"WE MAKE IT FILTHY, AND WE MAKE IT GLORIOUS, AND WE TOTALLY BASTARDIZE A WONDERFUL TRADITION."

– DAVID DASTMALCHIAN

A four-story anthology feature, *The Boulet Brothers' Holiday of Horrors*, is the hideous lovechild of the Boulets and actor David Dastmalchian (*Late Night with the Devil*), each of whom direct a segment while also taking on horror host duties to introduce the chilling tales. The idea was born out of a genuine friendship that grew from the parallel successes they had on Shudder ("It's interesting because we have the most-watched show on Shudder and he had the most-watched film with *Late Night with the Devil*," says Dracmorda), along with a mutual love of the genre, of course.

"We're best friends in real life," Dracmorda says. "We've hung out constantly for years. Christmas, New Year's – we're always together on major holidays and stuff too. And we just wanted to do something together."

Indeed, the whole existence of *The Boulet Brothers' Holiday of Horrors* was predicated on gathering some kindred sick minds, then taking the holiest of holidays, carving out its still-beating heart, and serving it to the kiddies in their Christmas stockings.

"We take that beautiful, wonderful tradition and we subvert it," promises Dastmalchian. "We make it filthy, and we make it glorious, and we totally bastardize a wonderful tradition. No one usually feels comfortable leaning into the creepier elements of this time of year, where bearded old men are sneaking down chimneys and animals are flying across the sky and mysterious boxes are showing up unannounced under dead trees in our living rooms. I mean, for goodness' sake, Charles Dickens got it. One of the most famous ghost stories of all time is

set on Christmas Eve."

"And it's not just Christmas," adds Swanthula, emphasizing the film's broad approach, "but coming home for the holidays, even a family camping trip, Santa coming down the chimney, etc. One of [the segments] focuses on New Year's, but it is a very classical approach. Everything that you think about when you think about the holidays will be represented."

The trio is joined by co-director and screenwriter Akela Cooper (*Malignant*, *M3GAN*) and actress Kate Siegel (*The Haunting of Hill House*, *Midnight Mass*), along with several notable cast members, including such genre stalwarts as Bonnie Aarons (*The Nun*), Steve Agee (*Peacemaker*), and Tracie Thoms (*Death Proof*).

"You'll see a bunch of different styles and terrors," says Swanthula. "There's legitimate monsters; a couple of them are monster stories. One is actually animated. Another one is more straightforward, kind of eerie and supernatural. So it kind of runs a spectrum."

"EVERYTHING THAT YOU THINK ABOUT WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT THE HOLIDAYS WILL BE REPRESENTED."

– SWANTHULA BOULET

The Boulets' decision to create an anthology instead of a stand-alone feature arose in part from the positive response to 2023's *The Boulet Brothers' Halfway to Halloween TV Special*, their variety sketch show/special for Shudder that blended horror and comedy. They quickly realized that the anthology format gave them more opportunities to gather talent, but it also had another contemporary advantage.

"The format is easy to love, right?" says Swanthula, citing *The Twilight Zone* and *Creepshow* as influences. "Especially for someone with no attention span, which… I think everybody is like that now. You're telling a four-to-seven-minute story and then we're moving on. It's very palatable."

"That was one of the things we wanted to make sure of when we were talking about it with David," adds Dracmorda. "We're like, 'These are TikTok people, they want a whole movie in

A Festive Frightfest: *Tackling all things Christmas,* ***The Boulet Brothers' Holiday of Horrors*** *offers four original tales to tickle your tinsel.*

five minutes. And if they can't [get that], they're swiping you off the screen.'"

To make sure they hit the mark, the trio opted to write succinct tales that packed a punch, something that the format was uniquely suited for.

"I felt like the best stories within an anthology are those that operate and function like a really well-told joke," says Dastmalchian. "They're simple, they're to the point, there's a really great set-up, and then the punch line leaves you with either the wind knocked out of you, or laughing, or aghast."

Even so, the Boulets promise that their holiday haul will dial down the winky lulz in favour of authentic dread and gore – something they've been meaning to tackle for some time.

"We've done camp with *The Boulet Brothers' Halfway to Halloween* special," says Dracmorda, "and I think, typically, when [people] think of drag, they think of camp automatically. For us, in our hearts as creators, that's not really what we do. We can do that, but that's not really where our passion lies. Our passion lies more in straightforward horror. For example, our short in this is not funny at all. It's actually pretty disturbing, and you'll see a different tone from us as storytellers. It's something we've been looking forward to doing because it's a big part of our creative process, but people haven't really gotten to see that yet."

"I don't think camp is *completely* off the table, though," says Swanthula. "We're filming all the shorts and stuff, it kind of lends itself to a little bit of fun; a little bit of comedy with the horror. I like that juxtaposition. So, we're still feeling it out. It's a growing sort of morphing, changing thing, although I can say the tone of the shorts is straightforward horror, which we're excited about."

Though he's sharpened his fangs as a screenwriter and producer (see sidebar on p.23), Dastmalchian's segment in *The Boulet Brothers' Holiday of Horrors* – entitled "Yeti or Not" – will also be his directorial debut. Originally written as a Sasquatch-themed sketch by his longtime writing collaborator and *Grave Conversations* producer Leah Kilpatrick and their mutual friend Jennifer Polonia, the script was rewritten by Dastmalchian to secure a "holiday adjacent" angle. The resulting segment is about three female friends in mourning who gather on a snowy mountain where another friend went missing. Naturally, they run afoul of the titular snow beast, played by Dastmalchian himself… but with a twist.

"They have an encounter with a creature, a being that some believe mythological and that some – maybe myself – believe could quite possibly exist on Earth, and that is a Yeti," he says. "The interaction that they have with this creature turns the table for the audience, as we wonder which of the figures in the story is actually the most dangerous. I guess that's all I can say because I want to leave the rest up to the audience to experience."

For her part, actress Kate Siegel tackles a traditional but admittedly weird aspect of Christmas with "Down the Chimney," and Akela Cooper's "Old Acquaintance" marks the screenwriter's directorial debut. The Boulets remain cagey about saying much more about their segment in the special, but Dracmorda drops a few tantalizing hints.

"I don't want to spoil it too much, but it's kind of emotional," he says. "It's very sad and dark in a way. It plays on family ties and sort of testing people's ability to protect themselves versus loving the other person, if that makes sense. I always like a little bit of sadness to horror. I was a big fan of *Halloween 4*, when Danielle Harris was the kid in it. There was something really sad about how her mom's dead and this guy [Michael Myers] is after her. I appreciate that. I feel like it's just part of the whole horror experience. It makes it a little juicier for me."

The Boulet Brothers' Holiday of Horrors marks what is certainly a natural creative progression for the Boulets, who have previously contributed comic book stories to *Heavy Metal* (issue #311), DC Comics (*DC Horror Presents…*), and Boom! Studios (*Hello Darkness* #10). Not to mention six seasons of co-directing a reality competition television series.

"All the scripts in *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula* trained us for that," says Dracmorda. "And I think, by nature, we're just storytellers. I draw more from our experience writing comic books as far as directing, because I think we see things

"WE CAN DO [CAMP], BUT THAT'S NOT REALLY WHERE OUR PASSION LIES. OUR PASSION LIES MORE IN STRAIGHTFORWARD HORROR."

— DRACMORDA BOULET

in a very panel-for-panel, shot-for-shot way that I think was developed from working in comic books."

"I think some of that even comes from the drag world," adds Swanthula. "Essentially, a drag performance is storytelling. When it comes to a Boulet Brothers show, there's lots of different ways to do it, but we very much tell stories, and there's surprises and gag elements to it. Once we got filming *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula,* the world of television and film in general [became] kind of its own world with its own language. It's a natural progression to do something scripted."

This Christmas season, treat yourself for *The Boulet Brothers' Holiday of Horrors*, best seen, says Dastmalchian, with a refreshing libation in the comfort of your very own satin-lined casket, as they're far more practical than people tend to think.

"You can sleep in them, you can write in them, you can do things that I can't say in the pages of *Rue Morgue* magazine in them," he insists. "They're wonderful things!"

DAVID DASTMALCHIAN HOSTS HIS OWN TALK SHOW... WITH ONE FOOT IN THE GRAVE

MORTAL MATTERS

BY BENOIT BLACK

INTERVIEW BY ROCCO T. THOMPSON

You may know David Dastmalchian from last year's breakout hit *Late Night with the Devil* (a film you should really see if you haven't already) but did you know the actor/director hosts a real-life talk show called *Grave Conversations*? The show, which can be found on YouTube, offers a macabre twist to the format by inviting guests to chat about death, dying, grief, end-of-life care, and other convivial topics… all while laying in a coffin.

"These are big, tough conversations about stuff that scares us and often makes us feel isolated," says Dastmalchian. "So, when we have an opportunity to go into a space where we can talk about things openly, without any kind of fear or shame, it's just a great reminder that we're not alone in this, and death is the common denominator."

Guests who have dared to join the conversation include a growing list of creatives, the likes of Matthew Lillard, Kevin Smith, James Gunn, Mike Flanagan, Devon Sawa, and Mark Duplass. And, says Dastmalchian, there is no risk of running out of things to talk about.

"The science around it is fascinating," he says. "The ethics around [death] are fascinating. The rituals around it are fascinating. The emotions around it are fascinating."

Perhaps it's not that surprising to learn that 2004's notorious *Three… Extremes* is one of his all-time favourite "anthologicals."

"You think about a director like Takashi Miike, who inspires me so much because he's always unwilling to serve me something on the menu," says Dastmalchian. "I feel like he's always providing me something that is like, Chef's Secret off the menu that you don't see coming. And then they bring it to your table, and you're like, 'What the fuck is this?'"

"ONE OF THE BEST LABELS IN PHYSICAL MEDIA."

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IN HIS NEW BOOK *SCARED BY THE BIBLE*, AUTHOR BRANDON R. GRAFIUS ASKS WHAT KINDS OF HORRORS CAN BE FOUND IN SCRIPTURE. HIS ANSWER MAY SURPRISE YOU

HOLY TERROR

BY MONICA S. KUEBLER

WHEN THEY TAUGHT THE NOAH'S ARK STORY IN SUNDAY SCHOOL, MY ATTENTION ALWAYS DRIFTED TO THE NIGHTMARISH VISION OF all those people – a whole world of people – slowly drowning. Later, when the waters finally receded, would they reveal all the dead? What would that look like? Smell like? I've always found the Bible kind of a scary thing.

But, according to author and associate professor Brandon R. Grafius, the study of horror in relation to the Bible is a fairly new branch of research. It only began to develop about twenty years ago, following the publication of Timothy K. Beal's *Religion and Its Monsters*, a book Grafius considers formative to his own academic work.

"I think the first edition came out in 2003, and there was just about nothing in the field of Bible and horror at that point," Grafius tells *Rue Morgue*. "There were lots of biblical scholars who talked about monsters, because there are monsters in the Bible. There's Leviathan, there's the Red Dragon, and *Revelation*. But biblical scholars really looked at that from a comparative religion or myth study lens. Timothy Beal was the first to say, 'Well, yes, there are monsters in the Bible, but there's also a monstrous God who has some kind of connection with the creator in *Frankenstein*. We can really look at these different cultural expressions as ways to get at the same questions.'"

Since then, the field has continued to grow – slowly at first, but faster in recent years. In Grafius' latest book, *Scared by the Bible* (out now from Morehouse Publishing), he guides readers through some of the more horrific parts of the holy text. He examines not just what they have in common with contemporary horror but also what purposes the original authors may have intended them to serve. While the book is new, the seeds were planted during a specific moment in Grafius' PhD program in biblical studies.

Unholy Horrors: Scared by the Bible *author Brandon R. Grafius (top) draws a link between the more lurid tales from scripture and horror films such as Robert Wiene's* ***The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari****.*

"I was doing kind of a literary cultural approach to the text, but I was flailing around, not quite sure what to do," he says. "I was in a course on the history of Israel, and I read a passage, Numbers 25, where the Israelites are wandering through the desert. They start messing around with foreign women. God tells them to knock it off, but one of the Israelite men brings a Midianite woman into the camp. They go into the tent of meeting together, and then one of the priests picks up a spear, skewers them both, and is praised for his great zeal for God.

"An absolutely engaging and thought-provoking read."
—ZOE STAGE, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Baby Teeth* and *Wanderland*
The ROOTS of HORROR in SCRIPTURE
SCARED by THE BIBLE
BRANDON R. GRAFIUS

"Obviously, the divinely sanctioned violence is really disturbing," he continues. "But where my mind went immediately is that the exact same death scene happens in *Friday the 13th Part 2*. And because we're real geeks, also in Mario Bava's *A Bay of Blood*. So, that really got me thinking. There's this death scene that's exactly there, and it's not like I think the creators of *Friday the 13th Part 2* or *Bay of Blood* were intentionally referencing the Bible. But are some of the same things going on in these two stories?"

This question ultimately fuelled more than a decade of work, which Grafius put to use in *Scared by the Bible*. The book is highly readable, at times almost conversational, as it compares various dark sequences from the Bible with horror cinema (including *Last House on the Left*, *The Wicker Man*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, and the body-horror films of David Cronenberg). Along the way, it tackles subjects such as the Bible's monsters as stand-ins for royal regimes and why monotheistic religions need demons.

Of course, there are important caveats when comparing contemporary horror to centuries-old religious texts. Narrative style, purpose, and function differ sharply. Grafius lays out these challenges clearly and equips the reader with questions to aid in interpretation.

"The question of 'What kind of horror is in the Bible, and what does it look like?' is a really interesting one, an important one," he says. "I try to be very clear in the book that I'm not saying these are horror stories in the same way we think of hor-

"IT'S NOT LIKE I THINK THE CREATORS OF FRIDAY THE 13TH PART 2 OR BAY OF BLOOD WERE INTENTIONALLY REFERENCING THE BIBLE. BUT ARE SOME OF THE SAME THINGS GOING ON IN THESE TWO STORIES?"

– AUTHOR BRANDON R. GRAFIUS

ror stories today, but that they do have features recognizable in the genre. So, there are a number of rape-revenge stories in the Bible. There are stories that connect with cosmic horror, where the world is threatened with destruction and humanity isn't too high up in the order of things, where we question whether the divine beings are concerned with our best interest. There's body horror. There are lots of stories where monsters swim around in places that make the world a scarier place than we might have considered."

To illustrate these examples, Grafius often opens chapters with a contemporary rewrite of the excerpt he'll be discussing, to better illuminate its themes. Given the nature of the Bible, sometimes a mere verse can hide stark horror, easily glossed over if one isn't paying attention. Grafius' campfire-style retellings highlight what is sometimes hidden, providing a helpful bridge across the millennia.

"When I started writing the introduction, I was thinking about this story where Jacob comes to the riverbank and finds there's some guy standing there who may be God, may be an angel," he explains. "It's a little fuzzy. Somehow, they start wrestling with each other. And it's really laconic in the Bible – it's just one verse. 'There was a man on the riverbank, and they wrestled until daybreak.' For me, the Bible just hints at the horror but doesn't fully explore it in that scene. So, I started with that, trying to think about what it would look like if I pulled out. What is the situation really about? How can I emphasize the horror in this?"

These retellings, combined with the biblical text, historical context, and Grafius' modern horror connections, make a compelling case for a centuries-long throughline powered by human experience and anxiety, which on a fundamental level – economic, personal, social, or spiritual – hasn't changed much. And when he discusses the Old Testament as "a story of the trauma of history" in the appendix, one can't help but connect it to how much horror is still fuelled by trauma, and how the genre often provides catharsis.

Where faith enters is in the book's investigation of what these biblical stories are meant to teach believers. As a religious scholar, Grafius engages with that, but he's never cloying or heavy-handed. He reassures potential readers that he's not trying to convert anyone through "some kind of horror subterfuge."

He also appreciates that this area of study is still developing and that, for many, horror and religion make strange academic bedfellows.

"I feel like whenever I meet somebody for the first time and they ask about the kind of work I do, I have to go through this complicated script in my head about how honest I'm going to be," he says. "Do I just say something about how I look at the Bible in film and how the Bible is reflected in pop culture? Or do I want a deeper conversation and say, 'Well, I research the Bible and horror, and here's what that means.' Usually when I take the chance and am more open about it, I can see the wheels turning. It starts with a confused, 'Why in the world would you do that?' And then after a couple of sentences, I see them thinking about stories like Noah's Ark or the Book of Revelation and realizing, huh, yeah, okay."

THROUGH MUCH OF THE 20TH CENTURY, THE CATHOLIC CHURCH WAGED A WAR AGAINST HORROR FILMS IN ITALY. AUTHOR MATT ROGERSON DETAILS THE BATTLEFIELD IN HIS NEW BOOK *THE VATICAN VERSUS HORROR MOVIES*

PRIESTS, POPCORN, AND PANIC

BY MONICA S. KUEBLER

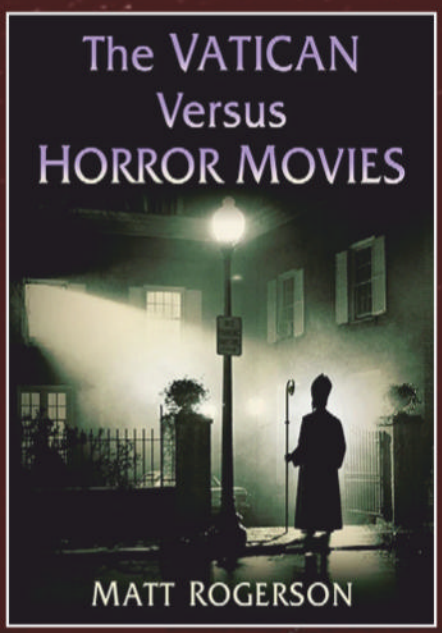
TO HEAR MATT ROGERSON TELL IT, HE GREW UP IN AN EXTREMELY CATHOLIC BRITISH FAMILY IN THE EARLY 1980s WITH A GRANDMOTHER WHO was directly involved with censure of the Video Nasties and a father who secretly nicked those tapes from her and pirated them. His curiosity about what his dad was up to ultimately led six-year-old Rogerson to his first (also secret) exposure to genre cinema, a moment rife with contradiction.

"There was this constant message: horror movies are bad, horror movies are evil; you watch these things, you're going to go to hell," he says. "So, I kind of grew up with this – on one hand, it's really exciting, I'm really enjoying these movies – on the other, I keep being told that it's really, really bad. So bad that it's going to affect my relationship with God and affect what happens to me when I die."

Rogerson credits this early viewing, along with the fallout after he was caught, with carving a direct path to *The Vatican Versus Horror Movies*, his in-depth look at how the Holy See and its in-house publication *Segnalazioni cinematografiche* ("Film Signals") shaped the development of Italian horror cinema. Along the way, he tracked down four decades worth of issues and even learned Italian so he could personally translate them. English-language excerpts appear for the first time in *TVvHM* (out now from McFarland).

"The Vatican would produce these pamphlets which, in their original form, were just maybe ten or twelve pages apiece," he explains, "and they would contain all the films that were due to come out in Italian cinema over that two-week period. [The write-ups would contain a] basic synopsis and then the all-important pastoral review, which was where they discussed the film in ecumenical ways – what about it was deemed inacceptable, what was deemed harmful, and what might corrupt good, God-fearing folk. And then they would pass a pronouncement."

In the 1950s and '60s, Catholicism played such a central role in Italian life that these pronouncements could bar a movie from cinemas and sometimes even kill a director's career. In his book, Rogerson examines the Vatican's reaction to some of horror's most popular subgenres, including gothic horror, *giallos*, slashers, cannibal films, zombie movies, and satanic horror. As one might expect, the Church did not treat these topics equally.



"A rather delicious irony I discovered is that horror films that show sacrilege, that attack God or attack elements of the faith, they're bad," he says, "but horror films that attack the Church itself as an institution, they're worse. The Vatican would protect itself as an institution more than it would protect the Word of God, more than it would protect what it believed, more than it would protect the Bible and all the stories in it. So, while the Vatican hated zombie films – zombies are inherently a very anti-Catholic creature, a perversion of the Resurrection – cannibal movies were viewed as sacrilegious because it's a perversion of the Eucharist, where instead of ingesting the body of Christ, you're ingesting the body of other humans."

Nunsploitation, to which Rogerson devotes a full chapter, also proved contentious, because many of these films were based on real historical events. Ditto for Naziploitation, a notoriously prickly subject given the Vatican's alignment with fascist regimes during World War II. As Rogerson notes, it was in part the Italian public's distrust of the Church following the fall of Benito Mussolini that ultimately loosened its control over cinema. The lesson is all too clear.

"What we are told is damaging and detrimental to our health, often isn't anywhere near as much," Rogerson says. "So, question what you're being told. If someone tells you this art is not to be enjoyed for these reasons, don't just take it at face value. Think about what reasons these institutions might have for telling you this, because there's usually more beneath the surface."

A JIGSAW PUZZLE THAT REVEALS A SECRET HORROR WHEN ASSEMBLED? DARE TO PIECE TOGETHER THESE PUZZLES OF DOOM!

THRILLED TO PIECES

BY ANDREA SUBISSATI

FOR SOME, JIGSAW PUZZLES ARE A RELIC OF THE KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM, A PRE-TABLET SLAB OF LO-FI ENTERTAINMENT DESIGNED TO KEEP sticky preschooler fingers busy. But many a hobbyist has kept up with the pastime, advancing to tougher difficulties, often featuring smaller pieces and more intricate artwork. While horror has gotten in on the fun with licensed illustrations and movie posters (see *Rue Morgue*'s wicked collab with Messed Up Puzzles from 2020), David Axelrod of Spark Plug Publishing took things a step further with his Puzzles of Doom line, where completing the puzzle reveals a classic painting… with a horrifying surprise twist.

"For a person who hasn't done a jigsaw puzzle since kindergarten and is reading this magazine, this puzzle is for you," says Axelrod. "What I'll say about the reveals is that they're PG-ish. They're not *super* scary, so you can do it with your kids, but they're spooky enough to be creepy and they're 500 pieces so they won't take a month to do."

Indeed, if you're the morbidly curious sort, you'll be so eager to reveal the secret surprise that you could ostensibly complete a Puzzle of Doom in a single sitting. Who wouldn't be desperate to know what became of Adrian Głębocki, whose Artist's Self-Portrait With His Children shows a mustachioed man with an odd expression, making paper cutouts with his charming (but potentially doomed) kids? Assemble the pieces identified in Bag 1 to start the image and then tackle Bag 2 to reveal a spooky surprise above Głębocki's head, added by New Jersey-based digital artist Ryan Doan.

"Finding the right artist was pretty tough," says Axelrod. "I was looking for a digital artist who did horror who also knew how to illustrate in an oil painting style. I probably wouldn't have done it if we couldn't find the right artist."

And yes, before you ask, Głębocki's Artist's Self-Portrait With His Children is a real painting from 1870, currently hanging in the National Museum in Warsaw. As is Joseph Weidner's Portrait Of Two Children Of The Clemens Bachofen Von Echt Family, featuring two small girls teetering uncertainly on the edge of the uncanny valley with their unsettling expressions of innocence and malice. What's with the red bracelets? What's up with that one dinner roll? But most importantly – what malevolence (again added digitally by Doan) lurks over the unassuming heads of Helena and Anna Clemens Bachofen von Echt?

PUZZLES OF DOOM
THE HAUNTED GALLERY
COMPLETE THIS PUZZLE TO REVEAL A SHOCKING SURPRISE!
TWO CHILDREN OF THE CLEMENS BACHOFEN VON ECHT FAMILY
500 PIECE PUZZLE

The paintings are real and the artist bios provided on the Spark Plug Publishing website are true, but their public domain status made them fair play for the Puzzles of Doom treatment. After selecting a piece of artwork with the appropriate eerie factor and enough negative space to play with, Axelrod and company developed brief backstories for the figures in the image, setting up a scary story to culminate in the surprise reveal.

"I would look at the paintings and not only did they have these areas of negative space to fill in, they also kind of presented stories: you saw them and you just started making up stories in your head. Like, why is this so creepy?" he says, referring to the Clemens Bachofen von Echt children. "Why are these two little girls just standing, looking vacantly, while a curtain is being pulled? A lot of these [paintings] not only beg for the space to be filled in but get you thinking about what is actually going on. Some of them have descriptions and you can find out who the artist is, but you really have to bring your own story to the painting."

The idea of completing a puzzle without being able to see the entire reference image isn't entirely new – passionate jigsaw enthusiasts (known as "dissectologists," apparently) have expanded the boundaries of the classic hobby by introducing new challenges and mechanics. Some of these include "speed puzzling" (where memorizing piece shapes rather than design allows for lightning-quick piece recognition), borderless puzzles (where a lack of flat edge pieces make it harder to form the all-important perimeter), and yes, puzzles where you get a box of pieces and absolutely zero material for reference, forcing you to rely on your intuition, perceptual skills, and most of all, patience. But for Axelrod, the modern appeal of puzzles is in their simplicity, the nostalgia factor, and the ever-widening communities of dissectologists online, who swap boxes the way we swapped marbles or *Pokémon* cards in the schoolyard.

"Obviously, [puzzling] got a huge boost during COVID," he allows. "What's kind of cool is there are some smaller brands doing interesting things that seem to have a lot of support from the puzzle community. In retail, they're always gonna have a spot in the toy section or, you know, at bookstores. It's kind of an evergreen classic activity that's never gonna go away."

The Puzzles of Doom line is a natural extension

"THEY'RE SPOOKY ENOUGH TO BE CREEPY AND THEY'RE 500 PIECES SO THEY WON'T TAKE A MONTH TO DO."

– CREATOR DAVID AXELROD

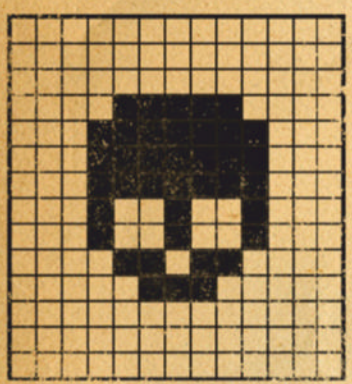
of Spark Plug Publishing's existing catalogue of creative D.I.Y. kits, stationery, and toys with one goal in mind: good old-fashioned analog fun. Activity kits for kids and adults such as "build a terrarium" and "clay for the home" may not be intrinsically spooky per se, but they always leave the door open to the artist's personal tastes. Just put on the appropriate soundtrack (Axelrod recommends vintage John Carpenter for setting the mood) and lose yourself in an activity that doesn't involve algorithms or hashtags. The Portrait Of Two Children Of The Clemens Bachofen Von Echt Family and Artist's Self-Portrait With His Children are the first entries in the Haunted Gallery series, but more puzzles are in the works for next year.

"The grand plan is to do different series," says Axelrod. "There's so much art available that you could use. You could make dozens in this set, but eventually doing custom illustration would be really fun, too. It obviously frees up a lot of possibilities and you can do different genres within it. You could do slasher or, you know, sci-fi ones. You could really go wherever you want with it."

Response has been warm enough that Puzzles of Doom can currently be found at uncommongoods.com, and is likely to expand its reach into your local toy and hobby shop soon. But of course, not everyone is into the idea of surprises and scares. Axelrod recounts a TikTok video about his puzzles that went viral in spite of not revealing the secret, and some users weren't happy.

"One post, people were getting really pissed that the posters weren't putting the surprise on there," he says. "[They said] 'No spoilers' and they were driving people insane. One post had almost six million views and all the comments were like, 'I hate you, you deserve to die, *what is it?*' People were getting brutal with it. So that was kind of fun."

CROSSWORD PUZZLES MORE YOUR THING? LOOK NO FURTHER THAN ADAM SIMPSON'S HORROR-THEMED WORD GAMES



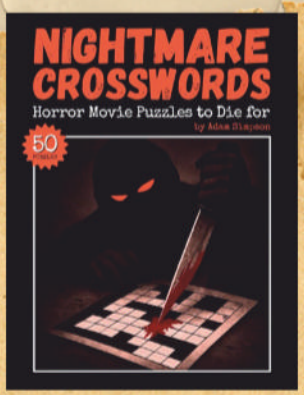
SPELLING OUT FEAR

BY MONICA S. KUEBLER

The thought of sitting down with a word puzzle might feel like a pastime from the last millennium, but for Adam Simpson, creator of *Nightmare Crosswords: Horror Movie Puzzles to Die For* and *Nightmare Word Search* (both 2025), it's a creative opportunity aimed straight at horror fans' hearts. Simpson's passion for horror and crosswords didn't fully mesh until the pandemic, when he started bingeing horror movies together with friends over Zoom.

"I needed a hobby," he says with a laugh… and he found one. Simpson began creating crossword puzzles, a process that takes anywhere from a few hours to a couple days and is not as easy as one might think. First, he had to choose a theme to tie the puzzle together, then create a grid and the "fill" (i.e. "all the other words that aren't necessarily related to the theme, but also fill in the puzzle"). Finally, he was tasked with writing out clues – easy, medium, and hard.

"For an easy puzzle, you might see a [few] more direct references to the fill," he says. "You also might get a theme that's a little bit more well-known, so you might get a really well-known horror movie quote [from *The Shining* or *Jaws*]. For a more difficult puzzle, you might get a theme where there's a little bit of wordplay. For example, I have one about the movie *Get Out* but the *Get Out* part is actually a pun that helps you figure out what is going on in all the themes."

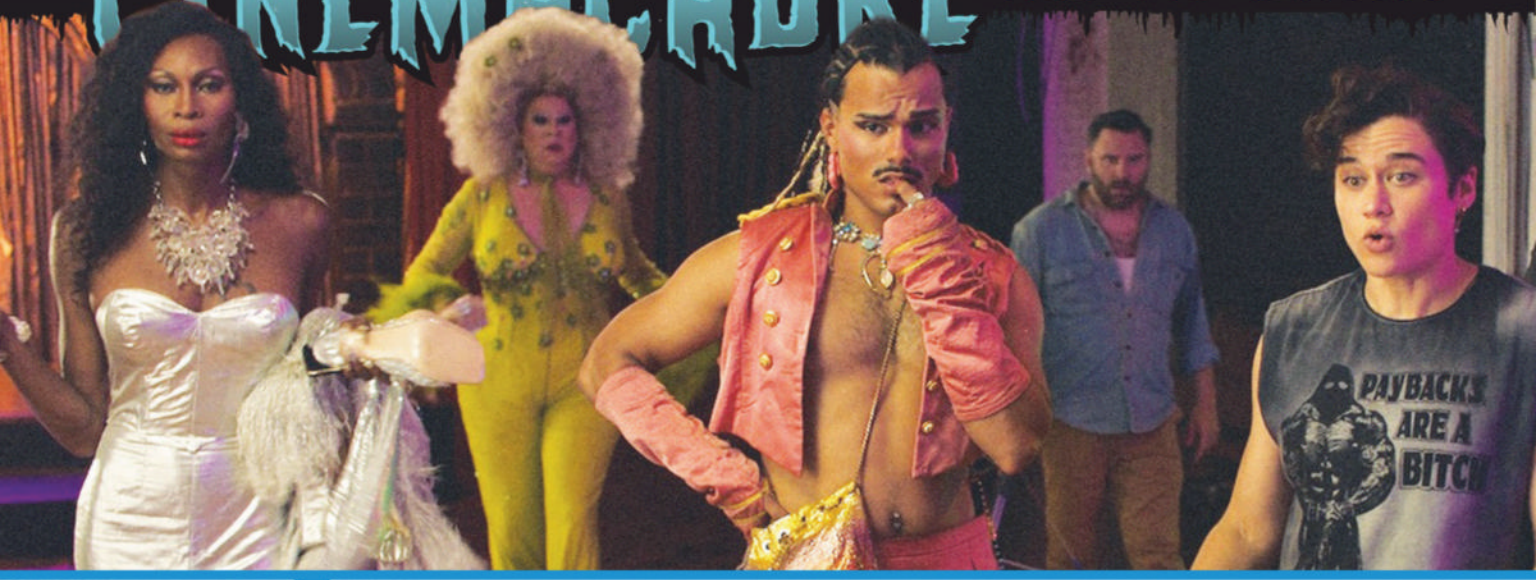


Simpson's follow-up, *Nightmare Word Search*, also has its own spooky conceit. Instead of a straightforward list of words to ferret out, they're embedded in a summary of the film, with the remaining letters spelling out a hidden phrase.

"I wanted to make sure I had iconic words and phrases that I think people would find memorable from that particular movie if they had seen it," he says. "And I really wanted to create a sense of nostalgia when you look at the word list and be like, 'Oh, yeah, I remember when that happened' and kind of create a little delight in that way."

CINEMACABRE

FILM + DVD + REISSUES



DAUGHTER OF THE LIVING DEAD

QUEENS OF THE DEAD

Starring Katy O'Brian, Jack Haven and Jaquel Spivey
Directed by Tina Romero
Written by Tina Romero and Erin Judge
Independent Film Company/Shudder

It might seem an impossible task to launch a career by taking on the bloodsoaked filmmaking mantle of your legendary father, but Tina Romero, daughter of George A. Romero (you know, the guy who essentially invented zombie cinema as we know it), has done just that with her zom-com *Queens of the Dead*. In this audacious and assured feature debut, the director follows in her father's formidable footsteps while also blazing her own trail and leaving her own bite marks on the undead genre.

During drag night at a gay nightclub in Bushwick, mundane issues like last-minute cancellations and pest control problems are quickly forgotten when the hungry undead flood the streets of Brooklyn. A ragtag group of drag queens, bar staff, and other assorted survivors must overcome their differences, band together, and use their skills if they've any hope of – oh, it's a zombie movie, you know the deal.

Yeah, many of the genre conventions established in Papa Romero's *Dead* series are evident here, from the "of the Dead" title format to the hordes of slow-moving undead shufflers, to the political themes given prominence – not to mention the appearances of Tom Savini and Gaylen Ross, and a love of absurdity that hearkens back to a certain pie-fight in a mall. But while the younger Romero gives many a loving nod to her legacy, make no mistake, as Savini's NYC mayor says to calm his constituents, "This is not a George Romero movie."

At a time when drag and the LGBT community is being increasingly vilified and threatened by the powers that be, it's something of a balm to see them be the heroes… and the jerks, and the biters, and the bitees. (Again, it's a zombie movie, you know the deal.) A stellar ensemble cast, a genuinely funny script that's got a heart, and a soundtrack full of bangers make *Queens of the Dead* a ripping party movie and the best "of the Dead" to rise in decades. Dad would be proud.

STACIE PONDER

FOUND FOOTAGE, LOST PLOT

IN OUR BLOOD

Starring Brittany O'Grady, E.J. Bonilla and Alanna Ubach
Directed by Pedro Kos
Written by Steven Klein, Aaron Kogan and Clay Tweel
Utopia

Documentarian Pedro Kos' narrative debut *In Our Blood* is far more effective as a drama than a horror movie. This found-footage psychological thriller is a sparse but diverting yarn that follows young documentarian Emily (Brittany O'Grady) and her DP Danny (E.J. Bonilla) through an increasingly harrowing week of shooting in Las Cruces, her hometown.

After a decade of radio silence, Emily's single mother, Sam (Alanna Ubach), whose addiction led to the dissolution of their family, has unexpectedly invited her daughter to Thanksgiving dinner. Emily agrees to visit, provided she be allowed to film the whole family affair, hoping to get some closure. When her mother disappears and the duo suspects a gang-connected cult, the mystery that follows is certainly compelling, but never especially suspenseful.

For the majority of its runtime, the film is well constructed. The found-footage frame is well executed – no shaky cams here – and Kos' experience as a documentarian gives his fictional DP's cinematography a nice verisimilitude. When Sam and Emily start getting emotional early on, Danny's choice not to cut when Emily asks him to is a tense one, and these queasy questions of loyalties owed seep into the movie's bones.

Unfortunately, the mystery that holds the movie together falls apart in the last act. A final supernatural twist may be jolting on first revelation, but it deflates the human story at the film's core. In order to shoehorn in the set-up for a sequel that will likely never come, the filmmaker undercuts his previously sympathetic (if clearly underdeveloped) exploration of substance dependency by literally demonizing drug addiction. This dubious decision is made worse by its own lack of conviction: it reads more like writing oneself into a corner than making a clear thematic statement. All told, though it has its moments, *In Our Blood* never really gets under the skin.

PAYTON MCCARTY-SIMAS

LOVECRAFT LITE

DREAM EATER

Starring Mallory Drumm and Alex Lee Williams
Written and directed by Jay Drakulic, Mallory Drumm and Alex Lee Williams
The Horror Section

"Our very own Overlook," remarks Alex (Alex Lee Williams) as he arrives with his girlfriend Mallory (Mallory Drumm) at a snowy vacation house – ill-advisedly foreshadowing a superior film with a similar scenario. *Dream Eater*, as the title indicates, adds Lovecraftian elements to the mix (it won Best Feature at last year's H.P. Lovecraft Film Festival), though unfortunately this lore is all backstory and no front story.

To its credit, this found-footage feature eschews the usual rough look and postproduction glitches many such movies apply in the name of "authenticity." The camera is wielded by documentary filmmaker Mallory as she and Alex head to that house to celebrate his birthday, and to deal with his sleep-disorder issues. He's been suffering from parasomnia, sleepwalking and occasionally indulging in self-harm, which might explain his irritable, lousy attitude as he complains his way through *Dream Eater*'s first half. That doesn't make him the most likable or relatable protagonist, but Mallory is devoted to helping him, sticking around even as the circumstances (starting with the discovery of occult sigils in a closet) increasingly suggest she should get them both the hell out of there.

Dream Eater works up some decent creeps in the home stretch once the supernatural influences begin making themselves known, and filmmakers Jay Drakulic, Drumm, and Williams are able to justify Mallory's constant shooting even as things become dire. Yet too much of the plotting is familiar, including Mallory's online consultations with a doctor who provides the necessary exposition about the evil entities behind Alex's problems. There's too much telling and not enough showing of this material, however, and it serves simply as justification for Alex to go all Jack Torrance in the final act. Those expecting true Lovecraftian terror might be disappointed that the titular creature is relegated to cameo status in a movie named after it.

KEN MICHAELS

SAW IT COMING

YOUR HOST

Starring Jackie Earle Haley, Ella-Rae Smith and Jamie Flatters
Directed by DW Medoff
Written by Joey Miller
Benacus Entertainment

The latest horror feature from director DW (*Pollen*, *I Will Never Leave You Alone*) Medoff, *Your Host* follows four fractious friends, Anita (Ella-Rae Smith), James (Jamie Flatters), Matthew (David Angland) and Melissa (Joelle Rae), to a plush summer house for a birthday celebration. But once the drinks start flowing and relationships fray, petty squabbles are the least of their worries. Drugged and held captive by a demented killer who refers to himself as their host (Jackie Earle Haley, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* 2010), the foursome is forced to play a series of sadistic games all in the name of fun… and revenge.

Right from its cold open, which sees a young man tortured with a complex contraption before having his head blown off, *Your Host* conspicuously apes the *Saw* franchise with its nasty, elaborate deaths and a malicious murderer on a mission to pull some uncomfortable truths out of his playthings. Haley is in reliably strong form as the ex-game-show host hell-bent on punishing those who have wronged him, whilst balancing a recognisable TV-star charisma, diva tantrums, and a healthy dose of cruelty. As for the supporting cast, they certainly do an excellent job at being as unlikeable as possible before they're subjected to various tortures, faring better when they finally drop some of the more obnoxious and unpleasant qualities of archetypal horror fodder.

Medoff's direction delivers a couple of well-shot and engaging set pieces, particularly one based around a game of confessions and another, reminiscent of *Family Feud*, that ends in an especially gory and well-executed kill. Speaking of which, the gore effects (mostly practical) are impressive and toe-curling throughout (fingers, eyes, skulls, and tongues don't get off lightly), and while the movie has some uneven performances, unanswered questions, and a lopsided tone, it's a decent bloody time.

For any rabid *Saw* fans lamenting the cancellation of the franchise's eleventh installment, *Your Host* might just be the movie to scratch that (phantom) itch.

BECKY DARKE

FOUR PAWS, SIXTH SENSE

GOOD BOY

Starring Indy, Shane Jensen and Arielle Friedman
Directed by Ben Leonberg
Written by Alex Cannon and Ben Leonberg
Independent Film Company/Shudder

Much has been made of the remarkable acting by Indy the dog in *Good Boy*, and he does indeed go down in the canine-actor hall of fame for his emotive and reactive turn. At the same time, director/co-writer/Indy's owner Ben Leonberg deserves a whole lot of credit for sculpting that performance out of more than 400 short days of shooting, combining just the right footage to create the "character" of a retriever that can sense the supernatural.

Leonberg, who scripted with Alex Cannon, also warrants praise for doing more with this premise than a simple story of Indy (playing "himself") saving his master from ghosts. Todd (physically played by Leonberg, voiced by Shane Jensen) brings Indy with him when he moves into a remote house to recuperate from a bout with cancer. He has inherited the place from his deceased grandfather (played in home-video footage by indie mogul Larry Fessenden in an effective cameo), and it gradually becomes clear – to Indy before Todd – that there are malignant spirits hanging around. The house, in a sense, is "sick," and the crux of the movie becomes Indy's attempt to protect the medically ailing Todd from this paranormal threat.

Good Boy is thus not only a quietly chilling horror film, but a moving meditation on mortality and the relationship between people and their pets. Shooting from a dog's-eye view, Leonberg elicits an affecting empathy for Indy, and a frightening one too, employing his expressive companion/star to suggest the presence of threatening forces with just the right look or movement. He makes judicious use of simple visual effects to present the spectres Indy senses, doing a lot more sonically, in concert with composer Sam Boase-Miller and the sound team led by Brian Goodheart and Kelly Oostman. The eerie ambience suffusing *Good Boy* is complemented right through to the end by the poignant way Leonberg and Indy convey the latter's devotion to Todd. A good boy, indeed.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

FUR & LOATHING

COYOTES

Starring Justin Long, Kate Bosworth and Brittany Allen
Directed by Colin Minihan
Written by Tad Daggerhart, Daniel Meersand and Nick Simon
Aura Entertainment

Coyotes is director Colin Minihan's modern "Nature's Revenge"-style horror-comedy about a pack of killer coyotes wreaking havoc in LA County, which would probably seem funnier if I didn't hear their fuzzy little pups howling outside my apartment balcony every year and know that the adults mostly keep to themselves. Coyotes, you see, can bite humans and they do kill little dogs sometimes (watch out, Dante!), but reports of them attacking – let alone killing – people are basically nonexistent. So, casting them as this

OVERLOOKED, FORGOTTEN AND DISMISSED

THIS ISSUE: LANCE CALCULATES THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST

STINKING SHIP

TITANIC 666

The Asylum

It was the summer of 1982 when I first heard "The Number of the Beast" by Iron Maiden. It opened with English actor Barry Clayton quoting Revelation 12:12 and 13:18, and would ignite a firestorm of religious controversy that lasted through the '80s. Skip ahead 40 years to a time when anyone can throw "666" around with impudence, including haphazardly tacking it onto film titles like these! Set 110 years after the launch of the original doomed ocean liner, this soggy outing follows the relaunch of the Titanic III, which is crammed full of personal possessions from its namesake's wreck, thereby pissing off the unquiet spirits of its dead crew and passengers. Though competently filmed and passably acted, it lacks the dread and terror that a shipwreck tale of this scale needs in order to be effective. If you want something wet and scary, try farting in the bathtub after eating Taco Bell!

BODY COUNT: 11

BEST DRINKING GAME: A shot every time you want a video influencer to die!

READY, FREDDY?

AXEGRINDER 666

Sterling Entertainment

It's a bit of a no-brainer that when your subpar horror movie franchise reaches its sixth installment you'll call it Part 666 – and yes, I'm looking squarely at you *Witchcraft*, *Children of the Corn* and *Camp Blood*! And thus, it follows that the producers of the *Axegrinder* films reached for that same low-hanging fruit and tacked the number of the beast to their sixth outing, which continues the story of Freddy Palmer, supernatural serial killer in a clown mask. This time around, horror's 666th-favourite Freddy hacks and slashes his way through a horde of horny, fishnetted goth punks out for a pleasant frolic on the beach. Packed with good kills, bizarre sex, and a coffin-full of laughs, the scariest part is all that exposed flesh! Honestly, goth kids – pack some SPF-500 and a fire extinguisher in case you all burst into flames!

BODY COUNT: 11

BEST DRINKING GAME: A shot every time someone isn't killed with an axe!

REALITY DRECK

SEASON 666

Fearopoly Films

When an immortal serial killer with a body count that rivals Michael Myers and Jason Voorhees is finally caught by the US army, the question becomes: what to do with him? Execution is impossible and jail is too expensive, so why not sell him to an elite tech and entertainment company so they can make a reality TV game show? That's the screwy premise in this disaster of a film, where five disparate contestants compete against each other – and the killer – to win the grand prize of one million dollars. According to IMDb, this dreck was made at an Airbnb over a two-day period with the players mainly improvising their scripts – something you won't find hard to believe if you manage to get through its soul-sucking 51-minute runtime. I'd rather watch reruns of *Love Island* with a chainsaw through my skull than have to sit through this again!

BODY COUNT: 6

BEST DRINKING GAME: A shot every time you yawn!

LAST CHANCE LANCE

movie's villains gives me icky let's-further-endanger-sharks-because-*Jaws* vibes.

Leaving that prejudice aside (for now), Minihan's cast is uniformly excellent, with Justin Long (*Barbarian*) playing Scott, a workaholic Los Angeles comic book artist who has to step up when the local coyote population is displaced by wildfires and starts attacking not just local pets but his family and neighbours. Long's *Barbarian* co-star Kate Bosworth is equally strong as his long-suffering wife Liv, as is Mila Harris as their (nearly) insufferable daughter Chloe. Kudos too to Minihan's regular star (and real-life partner), former Torontonian Brittany Allen (*What Keeps You Alive*), as a conspiracy-minded lady of the evening.

The coyotes, whether they are rendered with CGI, AI or whatever (mostly not practically, anyway), are impressively terrifying as they pick off the denizens of Scott's hillside community one by one. The script leaves the nature of their animus a mystery, with parallels drawn to the mysterious real stories of whales attacking boats. But demonizing these primarily solitary creatures feels wrong, especially as destruction of their habitat is going to make close encounters with humans increasingly likely. But if you don't give a fuck, no problem!

That caveat aside, Minihan (*Grave Encounters*) has crafted a sleek thriller that steadily ratchets up the tension. If you can get past the false news being spread against my mostly gentle neighbourhood critters, *Coyotes* is a real howl.

SEAN PLUMMER

A GRIM PRAIRIE TALE

THE PRINCESS AND THE DRAGON

Starring Nadine McLachlan, Mark Kiazyk and Karen Chrest
Directed by Miles S. Crossman
Written by Jonathan Ball, G.M.B. Chomichuk and Miles S. Crossman
Syndicado Distribution

In this micro-budget Canadian indie, a young woman (Nadine McLachlan) wakes up in some shadowy, labyrinthine institution, dressed in a princess costume with a blank white mask glued to her face and no idea how she got there or how to get out. (Should I have started this review with, "How many times has this happened to you?" Because... okay, never mind.) Scrambling to piece together clues – including a mysterious old storybook with a bunch of pages torn out – our girl has repeated close calls with a menacing armoured figure as she stumbles through a seemingly endless series of dark corridors and junk-cluttered rooms, barely managing to stay ahead of her pursuer. Fragmented memories of encounters with antagonistic institutional staff gradually combine as she discovers more of the book's missing pages, all helping her to piece together some semblance of explanation (if just barely) for her predicament, while becoming increasingly aware that she'll eventually have to forsake flight for fight and have it out with her attacker.

Director Miles S. Crossman and crew display a great gift for turning their murky location – Ninette Sanatori-

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ON THE SLAB: FEAR IS IN THE EAR

TINY THING

15:52 mins/Vimeo via Joshua Giuliano's Channel

When young couple Brian (Jacob DeMonte-Finn) and Lacy (Britt Harris) arrive at their rented lakeside cabin, they have what looks like a perfect romantic getaway ahead of them with swimming, a lovely steak dinner, and some hanky-panky – until the bright mood is soured when Lacy drops the L-bomb and Brian fails to reciprocate. Later, a bug curiously flies into Brian's ear, sending the pair into a night of ever-maddening chaos. Los Angeles native Joshua Guiliano's previous two short films, *Grandma's House* (2017) and *In Sound, We Live Forever* (2018), both relied heavily on audio cues to push their narratives, and in *Tiny Thing*, the buzzing sound of a pesky fly is the antagonist. Boosted by relatable performances by DeMonte-Finn and Harris, this short succeeds because it feels so familiar before veering into dark comedy territory.

STORYTIME

7:18 mins/YouTube via Dylan Clark's Channel

A girl (Sydney Brumfield) is listening to her favourite horror podcast while cooking her dinner and soon notices that the narrator (Sam Roberts) seems to be describing her actions with disturbing accuracy. Ithaca College alumni Dylan Clark made his first short film at age eleven and has since made many more, racking up several million views online. His goal with *Storytime* was to "weaponize sound and imagination," as he puts it, which is what happens whenever you cover your eyes while watching a horror film. Both sound and imagination are on point in this short, as Clark displays an impressive grasp of genre storytelling fundamentals, especially considering he's not even 25 years old. The accompanying making-of video on his channel is highly recommended as a fascinating look at indie filmmaking, and we wouldn't be surprised to see Clark follow in the footsteps of David F. Sandberg (*Lights Out*) and Parker Finn (*Smile*) by moving from YouTube shorts into the big time.

ROGUE WAVE

10:52 mins/YouTube via Zach Ramelan's Channel

Two inventors (Jacqueline Dos Santos and Katrina Anastasia) discover that by harnessing the correct combination of energy, vibration, and frequency, people can leave their corporeal body and become one with the universe. Once their device is built, it quickly catches on with the public, but one of the creators feels the pull of the transcendence more than the other, and a rift begins to form. *Rogue Wave* is the brainchild of Canadian filmmakers Zach Ramelan and Charlie Hamilton, collaborators for the better part of a decade. This remarkable piece combines the grassroots science fiction of 2004's *Primer* with a wonderful colour palette usually reserved for the realm of cosmic horror. The visuals are lavish, the score by Jonas Bock is sublime, and the themes explored travel far beyond the confines of its ten-minute running time.

JAY CLARKE

um, an old tuberculosis hospital near Brandon, Manitoba – into a deeply ominous supporting character, although it's ultimately McLachlan's energetic and sympathetic performance that keeps us clinging to her crinoline for the duration. Marred only by a few clumsy action sequences and a backstory that remains a little more vague than it needs to be, *The Princess and the Dragon* is a fun, creepy cheapie with some impressive newish talent – "ones to watch," as the trades like to stamp them – on both sides of the lens.

JOHN W. BOWEN

MEAT HOOK MEMORIES

CHAIN REACTIONS

Starring Stephen King, Patton Oswalt and Alexandra Heller-Nicholas
Written and directed by Alexandre O. Philippe
Dark Sky Films

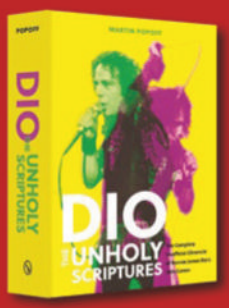
Did we really need another critical rehash of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in 2025? Probably not, but just try and stop us from gobbling it up like buzzards at a Brownsville barbecue. Documentarian Alexandre O. Philippe, who's previously helmed acclaimed features covering *Psycho* and *The Exorcist*, takes a largely hands-off approach to this collection of reminiscences and critical appraisals from Stephen King, filmmakers Karyn Kusama and Takashi Miike, Aussie film critic Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, and stand-up comic/writer/actor/mercilessly entertaining dinner guest Patton Oswalt. The common ground here is that they're all ardent fans of this pivotal classic with some fascinating insights to share, but they also represent a significant generational range and a terrifically diverse collection of cultural backgrounds and fields of endeavour.

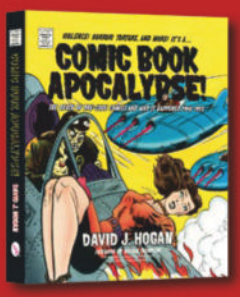
Heller-Nicholas is the only participant with whom I was previously unfamiliar, and I found her look at *Chainsaw* as a viewer-specific sense memory trigger refreshing, vivid, and valid. Miike's affectionate yet obtuse meanderings may be tiresome for any but his most ardent fans (full disclosure: I'm not one), although I loved his story of first seeing the film as a very unprepared teen. King is doubtless the marquee attraction here and he's in accustomed form, a font of insights about *Chainsaw*'s significance as both a genre film milestone and an eerily prescient warning to an increasingly ugly America. Kusama's take on *Chainsaw* as an examination of damaged identities is a sometimes frustrating mix of fascinating insights and injudicious overreach. The former makes the latter bearable and her final summation of *Chainsaw*'s real legacy rings truer than many others I've previously heard. Still, it's ultimately Oswalt's segment that's not only the most entertaining by far, but also dishes up some startlingly fresh critical insights into a film that's already been autopsied into oblivion.

If there's a single takeaway to *Chain Reaction*, it's that while we can all agree that *Chainsaw* remains a stand-alone masterpiece, our reasons for feeling that way are extraordinarily diverse. And, for the most part, equally valid.

JOHN W. BOWEN

GIVE THE GIFT OF METAL, MAYHEM, AND MACABRE





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CANADIAN FILMMAKER KURTIS DAVID HARDER FOLLOWS UP HIS 2022 HORROR HIT WITH *INFLUENCERS*, A SECOND TAKEDOWN OF BLOGGERS, VLOGGERS, AND STREAMERS, THIS TIME IN INDONESIA

CONTENT IS KILLER

BY ANDREA SUBISSATI

OF ALL THE BYPRODUCTS OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY, THE INFLUENCER IS PERHAPS THE MOST REVILED. HAVING LEVERAGED LIKES AND FOLLOWS INTO CASH AND CLOUT, THESE SOCIAL MEDIA "STARS" CAN BE SPOTTED POSING inappropriately at memorials, skipping lines at restaurants, and stopping traffic for selfies. They're as common these days as they are obnoxious, but for Canadian filmmaker Kurtis David Harder – the mastermind behind 2022's *Influencer* and its new sequel – they're as inevitable as death and taxes… with an emphasis on the former. And while other fright flicks have treated the entitled entrepreneurs as simple slasher fodder for some quick-and-dirty audience dopamine, Harder takes a different approach.

"It's more like I hate the game, not the player," the writer/director tells *Rue Morgue*, as *Influencers* sweeps the festival circuit. "Because when you meet these people, they're some of the most hardworking [folks]. Like, it's a hard job to constantly be on and recording content and stuff. I don't know if I necessarily respect the field, but I definitely respect the people doing it."

Hitting Shudder December 12, the sequel takes place shortly after the events of *Influencer*, with CW (show-stealer Cassandra Naud, who also serves as co-producer) now living a blissful existence in Paris with her girlfriend Diane (Lisa Delamar) and trying to distance herself from her past of kidnapping influencers, stealing their identities, and leaving them for dead on a remote island in Thailand. However, on a trip to a local castle, the duo run afoul of travel vlogger Charlotte (Georgina Campbell, *Barbarian*), and CW can't resist getting up to her old tricks. Meanwhile, *Influencer*'s resourceful heroine Madison (Emily Tennant) is trying to rebuild her life after taking some heat for CW's murders and tracks her old nemesis to Bali. Enlisting the help of successful streamer Jacob (Jonathan Whitesell) and his entourage of manosphere dudebros, Madison and CW's game of cat and mouse comes to a deadly head as they attempt to outmaneuver one another, both online and IRL.

As with the first film, Harder's treatment of the subject aims high rather than contending with low-hanging fruit, and both of his films tap into deeper themes of curated identity and human disposability. While certifiably dangerous, CW does make an interesting point by covering up her crimes with new content from her victims' stolen phones.

"CW has this whole mantra that [none of these influencers] will be missed, because as long as the online content is still coming, the person still exists in that field," Harder explains. "How does that kind of relationship between the online and the offline actually work? These people who are your followers, would they actually care if you went missing? Or are they just in it for the product you're providing?"

Beyond the parasocial dynamics between content creator and acolyte, Harder also tackles another internal friction inherent in content creator culture, particularly through the character of Jacob. A livestreamer, Jacob funds his lavish lifestyle by encouraging his following to be real men (as opposed to "wage-cucks") and not let women walk all over them. His incel rhetoric is toxic, for sure, but a peek behind the curtain suggests that he doesn't exactly practice what he preaches.

"Some of these male influencers are really tapping into something, probably what I view as a deeper problem in society," says Harder. "But I don't look at these guys as necessarily the cause, but they are a symptom. Me and [actor] John Whitesell both kind of went deep looking into what they're preaching and why it's resonating so well… it becomes a bit of a loop. You're seeing what's working for popular content – it might not be what you actually believe, but then you get caught in this cycle where it just spirals. And so you're influencing culture, but then the culture is influencing you."

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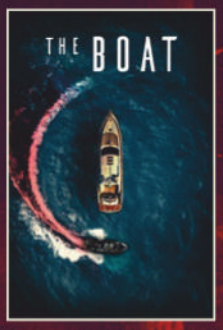

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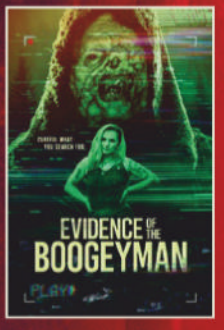

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BY MICHAEL GINGOLD

FREAKED OUT AND BETTER THAN EVER

During the first half of the 1990s, before *Scream* revitalized horror commercially in '96, the genre went into a serious downswing when it came to theatrical releases. The combination of slasher-franchise fatigue, the rise of VHS, and the collapse of many major independents in the late '80s meant that in the following decade, many scary movies went straight to video. And numerous titles that would have enjoyed wide breaks or filled grindhouse and drive-in screens several years before received only single-screen bookings in a handful of major cities, sometimes just one or two.

A key example is Tom Stern and Alex Winter's berserk horror comedy *Freaked*, though it was more a victim of a corporate regime change than the aforementioned factors. The new top brass at 20th Century Fox had no idea what to do with the movie the directors had wanted to call *Hideous Mutant Freekz*, so they saddled it with that less outrageous new title and slashed its big-screen plans. Following a special preview screening at the USA Film Festival in Dallas, and a berth in the Midnight Madness section of Toronto's Festival of Festivals (now the Toronto International Film Festival), *Freaked* was tossed into just two theatres, in New York City and Los Angeles, on October 1, 1993, with minimal advertising.

Despite that lack of promotion, I was raring to see *Freaked*, being well aware not only of this feature but Stern and Winter's previous shorts and student films. (They attended New York University's film school around the same time I did, and the makeup effects artist on my final project, Rob Benevides, also did the prosthetics on their NYU movie *Aisles of Doom*.) So, I joined a group of friends and headed down to Manhattan's Village East theatre to catch *Freaked* – and we laughed our asses off. From the marvelous opening credits by animator David Daniels to the creature-effects blowout finale, the movie made instant fans out of us.

We weren't alone, as Winter has kept the movie alive by hosting screenings of one surviving print ever since, and in July 2005, *Freaked* got its first disc showcase from Anchor Bay Entertainment. The two-DVD set included a host of the usual supplements such as audio commentary (a hilarious one by Stern and Winter), deleted scenes, and making-of footage. But the jewel in its crown was a complete cast read-through, revealing jokes that didn't make it to the final cut and the delightful sight of Keanu Reeves throwing himself into his Ortiz the Dog Boy character without makeup.

It's hard to believe it has been twenty years since that set landed, and that *Freaked*'s followers have had to wait so long for a proper Blu-ray edition. (Anchor Bay and Starz issued a hi-def disc in 2013 containing none of the DVDs' bonus features.) This year, it's Drafthouse Films and Australia's Umbrella Entertainment to the rescue with a UHD/two-Blu-ray set releasing November 5, featuring a fresh 4K restoration (also playing digital platforms this fall) and an assemblage of extras as insane as the movie itself.

The limited, numbered Collector's Edition is chock full of new material, including an alternate workprint cut, interviews with Stern, Winter, and their creative team, hours of on-set footage, makeup tests, and lots more. Ported over from the Anchor Bay DVDs are that read-through (yay!), the Stern/Winter commentary, an NYU short by the duo, a chat with co-writer Tim Burns, deleted scenes, and trailers. (Not everything from that set is duplicated, so hold onto it if you've got it!)

And that's not all… The set also comes with a 100-page book containing new essays by Justin Beahm, Witney Seibold, and Mike Saunders, plus behind-the-scenes images and fan art, a script book with new artwork by Nicholas Baltra, a "So You're a Hideous Mutant Freak, Now What?" pamphlet, a poster and stickers, all wrapped up in a custom slipcase and rigid case, both with art by Thomas Nicolette. It's a home-format celebration worthy of an enduring classic of cinema – and if you ask me, and the many who have enjoyed Stern and Winter's crazed achievement in '93 and thereafter, that's exactly what *Freaked* is.

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IT CAME FROM BOWEN'S BASEMENT

DRIVE-INS, DELETE BINS AND OTHER SINS

Little Help Here?

by John W. Bowen

Horror movie idea! Someone spending the night in some reputedly haunted domicile for financial reward, bragging rights, or some combination thereof. "Well shee-it, that's easy," wheezes the Wretched Reader, sensing imminent trivia night victory, "that'd be *The Legend of the Haunting of Hell House on Haunted Hill Versus Mr. Chicken*!" You'd be correct(-ish), but you could also be forgiven for omitting *Help!* (a.k.a. *Au secours!*), a largely forgotten 1924 silent short film directed by pioneering French filmmaker Abel Gance and starring celebrated comic actor Max Linder. Linder himself seems similarly lost to time which, given his notoriety for all the right and wrong reasons during his lifetime, is hard to fathom.

Renowned as both a comic and romantic leading man, Linder's sole foray into horror – albeit of the darkly comic variety – came with his second-last acting role in *Help!*. Scripted by Linder and Gance, it was initially intended as a feature, but with so much action crammed into its twenty-minute run time, one can scarcely fathom how they'd have stretched it over an hour. (Seriously, the pacing of this thing makes *The Evil Dead* look like *La belle noiseuse*.) Setting it all in motion, men in one of those cigars-and-brandy private clubs swap tales of a very haunted local castle in which no one has ever spent more than an hour (let alone a whole night). They dangle a tidy sum in front of newlywed Max, daring him to last 60 minutes without pressing an alarm button that will send rescuers; the cocky bastard agrees, toddles off to the edifice, and the festivities begin.

Via practical effects and primitive camera trickery, our brilliantined protag immediately finds himself under relentless attack by skeletons, snakes, tigers, hyenas, crocodiles, medieval executioners, a hippo, ghosts, and a bunch more bugaboos. Max's fingers repeatedly hover over the panic button, but will he lose out on his big payday? I'll never tell, so go get yer Youtube on and find it, 'cause it's great fun.

Help! was Linder's only genre role, but spending an hour in a haunted house was a cakewalk compared to his real life. He was one of the highest-paid film stars in the world – on par with Charlie Chaplin, with whom he shared a close friendship – before being drafted into the French army to serve in World War I. Afterward, suffering persistent health problems as well as PTSD, he returned to the industry to experience several triumphs and multiple failures in both Europe and America, increasingly exacerbated by his erratic behaviour, spiralling drug and alcohol problems, and an ill-advised affair with seventeen-year-old Hélène Peters.

Linder and Peters decided to flee Paris for Monte Carlo (apparently, what happened in Monte Carlo back then stayed in Vegas), a plan scuttled when both were injured in a car accident near Nice. Under threat of arrest for kidnapping a minor, Linder managed to skirt charges by marrying her the following year when she turned eighteen (and he turned 40). Friends and associates now became concerned at Linder's increasingly bizarre conduct, particularly as he grew possessive and occasionally abusive toward Peters, even after she gave birth to their daughter in 1924.

Linder and Peters were found by Paris hotel staff just over a year later, hovering near death from an overdose of opium and sleeping meds, both with their wrists cut. Neither survived. Whether this was a double suicide or a murder-suicide orchestrated by Linder remains unresolved, though public opinion has long skewed toward the latter scenario.

The foregoing may have foregone a century ago, but given the public's continued fascination with the scandalous carryings-on of so many of his contemporaries – Rudolph Valentino, Thelma Todd, Gloria Swanson, and Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, anyone? – Linder's lack of legacy as an early film star who steered his life straight into the toilet clockwise is kind of inexplicable. And on that feel-good Yuletide note, get the hell out of my basement and have yourself a happy and safe holiday season... with maybe just a hint of scandal to spike the 'nog, right?

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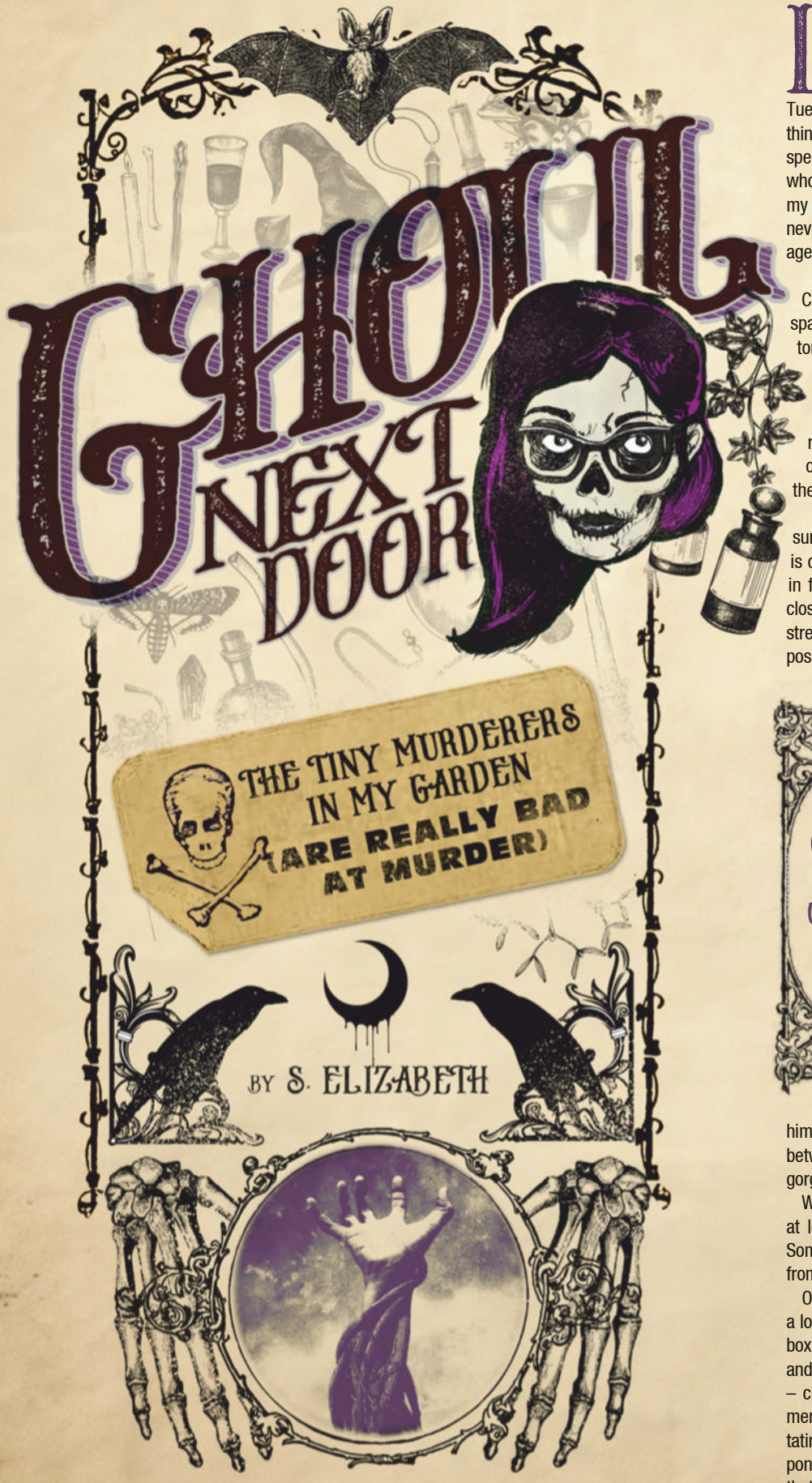

I FINISHED READING SARAH MARIA GRIFFIN'S HORTICULTURAL HORROR NOVEL *EAT THE ONES YOU LOVE* ON A Tuesday evening and whiled away my Wednesday thinking about Baby, the carnivorous orchid who spends the novel plotting to consume the florist who tends him. And I wondered why, despite all my macabre interests and dark inclinations, I'd never considered cultivating something with savage appetites.

Griffin's story drops us into the Woodbine Crown Mall, one of those slowly dying retail spaces where the food court echoes with phantom teenage conversations and half the storefronts gape empty like missing teeth in a still-grinning skull. Baby lives in the heart of this decay, and it's a perfect set-up: a carnivorous orchid thriving off the decaying ecosystem of a place that's feeding on its own corpse while the muzak plays on.

Baby wants to adore and devour in equal measure: his obsession with florist/shopkeeper Neve is one of twisted attachment and fevered fixation in full bloom – not romantic love but something closer to the urgent desperation of how drought-stressed roots chase water, except way more possessive and profoundly disturbing. You can feel

> "FOR ALL MY CAREFUL CURATION OF CREEPY AESTHETICS AND HORROR REFERENCES, CARING FOR CARNIVOROUS PLANTS TURNS OUT TO BE REMARKABLY ORDINARY."

him spreading through the mall's bones, threading between electrical wires and under tile grout, a gorgeous parasite with very specific cravings.

We've all wanted to swallow someone whole at least once. Baby just has the anatomy for it. Somehow, it's less weird coming from him than from me.

On Thursday, I found a miniature pitcher plant at a local nursery and a small Venus flytrap at a big-box home improvement store. Both were stunted and janky from neglect. It's summer in Florida now – cicadas shriek like dying klaxons in the shimmering, suffocating heat, with everything devastatingly green. Behind the plant store, a retention pond sits ringed with dense, weeping vegetation that looks like it's digesting something. It's the sort of landscape Jeff VanderMeer wrote about in

his *Southern Reach* trilogy, and now I'm gingerly clutching two tiny predators, wondering how to keep them alive while surrounded by vast, tangled wilderness that's clearly thriving without any human input. In fact, eyeing the random sneaker floating on its algae-rimmed surface, I'd say it seems to be doing just fine consuming human input!

YouTube tells me that these savage little guys like it boggy and bright, and apparently, they aren't even all that bloodthirsty – they don't actually *need* to eat bugs if they get enough sun, which seems like false advertising. Where's the carnage? The drama? The whole appeal was supposed to be having tiny killers on my porch. I cobbled together a makeshift tableau on my backyard screened porch amongst some Lego succulents, a half dozen glow-in-the-dark *Princess Mononoke* kodama spirit Gashapon toys, and some creepy fake vines that I pretend slithered right out of *The Ruins*. It's a sort of weird domestic shrine that at least gives the impression of some botanical funny business, even if the care of Thing One and Thing Two did turn out to be remarkably quotidian.

At this point, I hadn't decided on names for my new pets. I was tempted by Edgar and Alan Frog of *The Lost Boys* – adorably inept little hunters focused on their prey. Then I hit upon the idea to name them after the Duras Sisters, Lursa and B'Etor – ambitious, predatory Klingon warriors, calculating and dangerous, perfect namesakes for carnivorous plants. I wasn't totally sold on either option, and I figured I shouldn't get too attached just yet because I do not have a great record with houseplant survival anyway.

Remember that moment during the pandemic when everyone you knew became a plant collector? (I went the sourdough route myself, but I'm a late bloomer in practically all things.) COVID lockdowns turned the ho-hum houseplants into an antidote to loneliness; everyone suddenly desperately needed something alive to care for, finding comfort and community in tending green things. The hobby exploded so dramatically that a houseplant black market emerged, complete with poachers and everything. Nothing new, really, considering the orchid thieves of yore, but pandemic plant mania took it to new extremes.

No extremes to be had here, though. For all my careful curation of creepy aesthetics and horror references, caring for carnivorous plants turns out to be remarkably ordinary. The gap between fictional plant menace and actual plant care is vast: Baby may scheme and consume, and H.G. Wells' orchid may strangle its victims with tentacle-like roots, but my little predators are content to photosynthesize their way through summer without eating a single fly. Like Arthur C. Clarke's cowardly orchid that screams in terror at the sight of Aunt Henrietta, the reality is far less dramatic than the literature suggests.

Wallflowers though they may be, they still needed names. And so, Patty and Selma sit in the sun, their appetites decidedly more mysterious and, quite frankly, more mundane than monstrous. For all I know, they could be as perpetually dissatisfied as their chain-smoking namesakes. They don't do much. They're pretty lazy. They haven't killed anything for themselves, so I definitely don't see them murdering at my behest (or developing any murderous ambitions of their own). An ant crawled up into Patty's trap last week and she just... ignored it! Even the bugs aren't taking them seriously. I guess the best I can say is that several Fridays later they're still alive, and that's something. Turns out bringing horror home just makes it into housework.

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BLOOD IN FOUR COLOURS

BY PEDRO CABEZUELO

I have a friend who suffers from apotemnophobia to the point where even the mention of the word "amputation" sends him into spasms. Though extreme, it is undoubtedly a deep-rooted fear shared by many, and one that writer Ryan Oliver sought to explore in his latest graphic novel, *Phantom Grip*.

"I've always had an intense, morbid fascination with the fear of losing a limb or such," says Oliver. "One of the touchstone subgenres for me is body horror. Threats or attacks from outside forces are a bit commonplace in drama, but when one's own body turns on itself, I find it uncommonly terrifying. So this story is deeply rooted in the phobias of self-sabotage and physical trauma. Dark as those themes are, I tried to infuse them in a creative and uniquely engaging storyline."

In the book, we meet Thera Wright, a highly successful surgeon who becomes the victim of a deadly snake bite while on vacation. The result is the amputation of her right arm, which sends her spiralling into a deep depression, unable to come to terms with not only the loss of her limb, but most likely her career as well. While recovering in the hospital, Thera begins to experience "phantom limb" syndrome, believing her newfound spectral arm enables her to do things like pick up a glass, write messages, and maybe even operate on the terminal cancer patient down the hall.

Unlike similar body horror stories, in which lost appendages come back and wreak murderous mayhem, *Phantom Grip* plays it cool for most of the narrative, slowly exploring Thera's condition and how it's affecting her state of mind.

"The mythology behind the story is anchored on the idea that there's a dormant ghost stuck inside of each one of us," explains Oliver. "Most ghost stories seem to turn otherwise decent characters into darker versions of who they were in their mortal lives after death. As if simply dying changed a well-mannered, living person into a vicious spirit with newfound ill intent. With that hallmark of haunt lore considered, I thought it interesting that if only part of a body was removed, might that not open an available void where said ghost could conduct its business in part? That dynamic was interesting because it's a lost limb, a possession, and the body turning on itself all in one shot."

But if you're expecting a happy ending, look elsewhere. While *Phantom Grip* does eschew traditional body horror for most of its pages, it packs one hell of a wallop in its climax once Thera decides she's fit to go back to her old career – unsupervised and unsolicited. The resulting fallout is a genuine WTF moment that will have you re-thinking and re-evaluating exactly what you've just read.

DID YOU HEAR THAT? SOMEONE'S INSIDE THIS ROOM, I'M TELLING YOU!
THERA WRIGHT, IF YOU OR ANYONE IS INSIDE THE ROOM, PLEASE OPEN THE DOOR NOW!
LET'S TAKE THE DAMN DOOR OFF THE HINGES!
ARGH, SHUSH!
KLACK
KLACK

Phantom Grip: *Body horror meets ghost story when a surgeon loses her arm.*

"I was definitely going for a big dark twist that would reveal the sinister nature of the ghost and/or the madness of a character who lost her future and self-worth," says Oliver. "In another version of the story there was a larger body count but, for complicated reasons, that would have shown my hand and 'spilled the beans.' I also think if you try to impose a specific reaction from readers you risk a backfire. Sometimes it's best to just go with your gut and serve the story."

FOLLOW PEDRO ON X @PCABEZUELO

QUICK CUTS

Full-time bear/part-time serial killer Samantha is back in *Beneath the Trees Where Nobody Sees: Rite of Spring #1*. Almost a decade after nearly getting caught (in the first book), Samantha has seemingly settled down, content to live and let live among her fellow anthropomorphic animal neighbours in the sleepy town of Woodbrook. The peace may soon be shattered, however, when the sister of one of Samantha's first victims appears on the scene, looking for answers and justice. This sets off a tense game of cat and mouse, though by the end of the first issue you may be questioning exactly who is occupying which role. While filling your horror story with cute animal characters may at first seem at odds, author Patrick Horvath makes it work by playing it all straight. This is a serious, gruesome world that just happens to be inhabited by talking bears, ducks, dogs, cows, et al. If anything, the imagery of cuddly creatures getting sliced and diced drives the horror elements home even harder.

Kids have it tough, what with school, peer pressure, and puberty. And finding out your parents are vampires doesn't make things any easier for a group of four children who live in a quiet, suburban cul-de-sac. On their annual summer campout, the kids finally learn the horrible truth about their parents: they're Necratil, a vampire offshoot who can absorb life essences as easily as they can suck blood (a moot point for their victims who end up dead either way). Horrified at the thought of embracing their heritage, the children hope to rebel, but a merciless group of vampire hunters target their families for mass extermination before they get the chance. *Cul-De-Sac* has two strong ideas working in its favour: first, telling the story from the children's point-of-view brings a fresh perspective to vampire lore, juxtaposing innocence and wonder with brutal violence. Second, the vampire hunters – heroes in most tales – are vicious and pose a deadly threat to those the reader has come to empathize with. It's an unexpected inversion of the standard trope and should allow the book to move in fascinating directions.

It might seem incongruous to do a black-and-white adaptation of *The Colour Out of Space* but Gou Tanabe's result works quite well. After all, said colour is supposed to be nigh indescribable, outside the known visible spectrum, so it's fitting that it be left to the reader's imagination. Beyond that, this is a fairly faithful adaptation of Lovecraft's short story about a meteorite crashing into farmland and slowly poisoning – and bizarrely transforming – crops, livestock, and ultimately, people. Tanabe forgoes the non-stop visual histrionics found in much horror manga in favour of a pervading unease that creeps its way slowly through the tale. When the inevitable eruption of body horror finally occurs in the last act, the tension snaps, making the conclusion even more disturbing.

Anyone who's attended a big comic con knows there's plenty to fear: long lineups, inflated prices, and cosplayers. And if *Dread the Hall H* is any indication, it's not just patrons experiencing high levels of anxiety. In fact, much of this four-story anthology reads like a cathartic exercise on the part of the creators, particularly the segment "Q&A," in which actors at a panel promoting their latest blockbuster franchise entry must endure the stream-of-consciousness rantings of a dedicated fan who just can't seem to get to the point. It's a "there but for the grace of God go I" reading exercise that's cleverly spread out throughout the issue instead of being presented in one lump. Though the middle tales have their moments, the true standout is the final installment, "Never Felt So Alive," which has a genuine zombie infiltrating a group of *Walking Dead* fans at the con who all think he has the *best costume ever*. It takes a nice bite out of cosplay culture and serves up a delicious denouement.

After nearly three years, former Vatican exorcist Professor Dario Bava is back in *Orgy of the Blood Freaks #2*. Continuing on from the first issue, Bava is investigating the haunted abbey ruins where his assistant was murdered. Along with nun Sister Sadie, he runs across ghosts, demons, something resembling a giant Gila monster, and plenty of topless vampire women. It's a gooey, gory funfest that rarely stops to catch its breath yet still manages to flesh out the overall story arc with some much-needed answers. On the flipside – literally – is the stitched-together, undead cowboy Gringo Loco in *The Buzzard King's Bounty*. On the trail of bounty hunter Cyrus Caldwell, our Loco dives headfirst into a gut-spewing, bullet-bouncing bloodbath that would make both Sam Peckinpah and Lucio Fulci proud. This is a loving callback to spaghetti westerns with a healthy dose of modern horror sensibilities.

Looking to add some Horror to your holidays?
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THE NINTH CIRCLE BOOKS

THE BASEMENT TAPES

Mitsu Okubo and Luca Antonucci, eds.

V.S. Press

Genre cinema boutique label Vinegar Syndrome recently returned to the printed paper business, and *The Basement Tapes* is its first coffee-table book. Part curio, part film archive memento, this lurid 350-plus-page art book is for all cinema-loving weirdos, from hoarding collectors to casual neophytes. Curated by members of The Basement (a Fog City-based, underground cult, devoted to all things VHS), *TBT* presents a collection of tapes of all kinds (and for all tastes), with covers that sometimes feature amateurish but always striking visuals and backs that often showcase crudely fun photomontages.

From *Lady Terminator*'s sleazily alluring Shooting Star slipcover all the way to Unicorn Video's unbelievable clamshell art for *The Demons* (Jess Franco's *The Devils* rip-off), this colourful collection of VHS box art sure ain't for kids nor easily offended folks. You're in for cheap slashers (such as *Nail Gun Massacre* and *Maniac Cop 2*), exploitation gems (including Australian gorefest *Body Melt*, 1974's *Sweet Movie*, the second *Ilsa*, and Jim Van Bebber's *Deadbeat at Dawn*), the crème of trash cinema (by John Waters and friends), Troma titles, some sex oddities (*Bat Pussy* and *Beaverly Hills Cop*, anyone?), a couple of German horror classic(k)s (from Jörg Buttgereit and Olaf Ittenbach), and way more. The film selection is also interspersed with mind-boggling non-fiction (including GG Allin's work, sexy ladies with guns, and Italian Mondos) and educational videos (on urine-drinking, satanism, and breastfeeding, among others).

And rest assured, all VHS boxes were scanned on a black background with warts, stickers, and all, then printed full-size on heavy stock. A few essays (including one on why keeping this beloved format alive is important) and a picture/promo gallery from The Basement itself bookmark the volume. All in all, this bad boy should please the analog-addicted friend you want to spoil on Christmas.

KRISTOF G.

THE PERILOUS DEEP: A SUPERNATURAL HISTORY OF THE ATLANTIC

Karl Bell

Reaktion Books

Humans have always had a complicated relationship with the sea, which is why our oceans are teeming with endless stories of bounty and terror. *The Perilous Deep: A Supernatural History of the Atlantic* takes an in-depth look at the tales of the lands and cultures that border the Atlantic Ocean and puts them into global and historical contexts.

By focusing largely on material from the mid-18th to mid-20th century, author Karl Bell looks across the vast body of water and seeks to make sense of the impressive mass of stories spanning from the deep ocean to the shallow coasts. *The Perilous Deep* is organized mainly by the type of supernatural phenomenon and sightings, drawing lines from one example to another to show how similar our experiences can be. It also illuminates the psychological and historical factors involved to help bring these tales to light.

Bell never loses his anchor on reality and often delivers apt observations about where these folklores come from and what service they may have offered people of that time. Lessons on treating corpses and strong tides with respect, for instance, can be far more memorable and entertaining when they feature gigantic magical creatures or vengeful spirits.

Merfolk, biblical whales, lost island cities, and soggy harbingers are among the general guideposts that *The Perilous Deep* utilizes to make some logical sense of the Atlantic Ocean's rich history of lore. Though the focus of the book is on the origins and context of these cautionary tall tales, no tales are told wholly, nor are they quoted largely in the book, as Bell is focused on telling the tale of the tale, and not the tale itself.

Impressively researched and engaging to read, *The Perilous Deep* does a demonstrative job of remaining focused on the task at hand. The Atlantic has existed for the entire length of humanity's residence on Earth, and examining the way we have tried to make sense of its generosity and cruelty is a worthy effort.

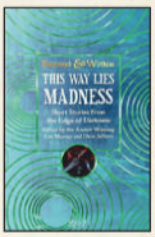
DEIRDRE CRIMMINS

THIS WAY LIES MADNESS

Lee Murray and Dave Jeffery, eds

Flame Tree Publishing

Anthologies sometimes drain one's mental well-being rather than elevate it, never mind when they try to tackle such frangible topics as mental health, which is what makes *This Way Lies Madness* such a welcome surprise. It's a beautifully constructed collection of short stories and poems involving mental health, illness, disorders, and domestic abuse, wherein each piece delicately embraces the jagged edges of its respective topic, which range from neurodivergence as represented through vampirism, body dysmorphia contorted into body horror, and anxiety as a monster lurking in every crevice and shadow. While the stories may not have you clutching your bedsheets over your head in terror, they will surely stay with you long after you've closed the book.



Horror fiction enthusiasts will be keen to spot some long-favoured and much-lauded writers in the table of contents, including Jonathan Maberry, Ramsey Campbell, and Alma Katsu. But the lesser-known authors featured here also bring their A game. Some standouts include "TBR" by Kayleigh Dobbs, which suggests that the unread stack of books on your shelf may be deadlier than you think; "Nothing and the Boy" by Amanda Cecelia Lang, where a shadowed effigy plagues a young boy no matter awake or asleep; and "Poppet" by Freddie Bonfanti, in which a mother will do anything to protect her daughter no matter how monstrous she may become.

This Way Lies Madness reminds genre readers that horror is evoked in a variety of ways. It's not just drawn out through the hack-and-slash gorefests we all know and love, but also in silent moments that linger just a little too long, the terrifying emptiness of nothing, and even our own thoughts as we recover from illness. The variety of subgenres included allows each story and poem to feel refreshing, and with such a wide range of mental and physical conditions compiled within the pages, it's hard not to feel at least somewhat represented. Anthologies can be easy to overlook but this one requires our full attention.

KENNEDY CAST

Beyond The Lesbian Vampire: The Neon Demon *(2016)*

BEYOND THE LESBIAN VAMPIRE:
RECLAIMING THE VIOLENT LESBIAN IN CONTEMPORARY QUEER HORROR

Sam Tabet

University of Wales Press

Queer culture has played an important part in the horror genre from its inception, and one of its more visual tropes is the "violent lesbian" archetype, into which author Sam Tabet does a deep dive in *Beyond the Lesbian Vampire*.

Going back centuries, lesbians have historically been placed in the same category as witches and strange women who didn't fit the submissive mould, and since horror plays into society's inherent, real-world fears, it's no surprise that violent lesbians became a staple of genre cinema. *Beyond the Lesbian Vampire* offers an extensive look at the various monstrous lesbians that have loomed over the genre, specifically in the films of the 2010s. Titles include *The Neon Demon*, *The Perfection*, *Knife + Heart*, *What Keeps You Alive*, *Good Manners*, *Thelma*, and *Lizzie*. Each film is dissected with a scholarly lens, often allowing the reader to follow along frame-by-frame.

In doing so, *Beyond the Lesbian Vampire* delivers well-rounded and well-researched theories that would appeal to folks of an intellectual, queer-horror nerd bent. Tabet includes visual references for each film, so even readers unfamiliar with the titles discussed can engage with the book's content. Overall, this is an accomplished text that digs deep into stereotypes and tropes to provide insight on how sex and gender continue to have a strong (and sapphic) influence over genre cinema.

RACHEL MEGHAN

DARK SISTERS

Kristi DeMeester

St. Martin's Press

Witch tree meets family tree in *Dark Sisters*, a neatly constructed multi-generational tale about monstrosities made of misogyny, including the internalized kind. At three times in history – 1750, 1953, and 2007 – a bloodline of women defies and resists the patriarchy of its posh hometown, Hawthorne Springs, and its oppressive church, The Path. As the threads interweave, the town's sinister underpinnings become clear, and the community's men meet their reckoning.

At the story's heart is a magical black walnut tree that serves as a transactional god for An-

DANTE'S PICK

MIDNIGHT SOMEWHERE

Johnny Compton

Blackstone Publishing

Relative newcomer Johnny Compton has been generating buzz in horror lit circles with his novels *The Spite House* (2023) and *Devils Kill Devils* (2024), but with his new collection, *Midnight Somewhere*, it could be argued that his short stories are even more impactful and haunting. There's no overarching theme, instead the book offers up a choice selection of Compton's previously published short works (which appeared on various horror fiction podcasts and in publications such as *Strange Horizons* and *The Rack* anthology) along with a sizable number of new tales. Part of the fun here is never knowing where Compton will take us next but coming to realize that the destination is always worthwhile – and always dark.

In "Monster Bites," for instance, a monster bites a pet dog with unexpectedly wild results, while in "A Devil We Used to Know," a completely different monster contemplates how a changing society has resulted in its near starvation. There's human-on-human malevolence at play as well, with "When You Put It That Way" in which an annoying husband drives his wife to violence, "The Ref" about a hired hit that takes a different murderous direction entirely, and "He Used to Scare Me By Accident," where a jumpy woman is haunted by the husband she accidently killed.

In the collection's standout stories, we see a man physically transformed by the haunted room he's been living in ("Every Time You Look Away"), another working through his grief in a rideshare that can literally take him anywhere ("Everywherever"), and in the weirdest of the bunch, a theme park roller coaster comes to horrifying and deadly life ("The Merge Monster Incident: One Year Later").

Through the course of the 21 stories that comprise *Midnight Somewhere*, Compton proves himself a competent purveyor of monster fare, supernatural spookfests, the dark side of humanity, and all points in between. Pick this one up and it'll be midnight near you too!

MONICA S. KUEBLER

EMILY A. WEEDON'S *HEMO SAPIENS* REFRAMES VAMPIRISM THROUGH PREGNANCY, MOTHERHOOD, AND THE BLOOD-DEEP TIES BETWEEN SEX, DEATH, AND BIRTH

MATERNAL CRAVINGS

BY MONICA S. KUEBLER

BLOOD IS LIFE. IT'S A TRUISM DRAWN OUT TO EXTREME ENDS IN EMILY A. WEEDON'S NEW NOVEL *HEMO SAPIENS*, IN WHICH A POWERFUL SECT OF FEMALE VAMPIRES OPERATES JUST BELOW THE SURFACE OF A WORLD INSTANTLY recognizable as our own. Weedon herself describes the novel as a "femme fatale, anthropological take on vampires," but it's also stocked with elements of detective fiction and a conceit that casts blood as key to the reproduction process of the book's Sanguin.

"I wanted to dispense with some of what I think of as the crutches in the vampire narrative," she says. "And the very first idea that occurred to me was this idea of pregnancy cravings tying into the vampire bloodlust. Those of us who have borne kids ourselves know the power of that craving that you can get. And so that lightning bolt was: what if that explains vampirism? Then, of course, it was an easy step to go, well, it's only the women who are vampires."

Hemo Sapiens (out now from Dundurn Press) sees well-meaning but hapless Toronto detective Luke Stockton attempting to solve a series of unusual homicides in the city (involving exsanguinated young men with severed or partially severed tongues) while navigating the confusing changes his marriage has undergone in the wake of his wife's pregnancy. Luke's professional and personal lives collide when his investigation keeps bringing him back to the same exclusive upscale wellness/maternity clinic that his wife is a patient at – the one with the deceptively alluring Cleo Drover at its head.

The Toronto (and surrounding regions) that Luke traverses during his work on the case will be instantly recognizable to anyone who's spent time in the city; Weedon's inclusion of real locations and streets, as well as references to historical events, imbue the book with a concrete place and time and sense of local authenticity.

"I really needed to use the architecture and the bones of the city that I walk in every day to lend credence and believability," she explains. "I wanted this story to really capture a suspension of disbelief. I think [Stephen] King does this so well in his works. King is just so good at getting the hell out of the way of his own story, you know. It just feels so rooted in a world that you and I live in. I knew from the get-go, I wanted that to happen in my world."

Weedon gave similar consideration to her vampires – not just how they could thrive undiscovered within contemporary society, but also how such a creature could exist at all. In this, she chose to dispense with most of the classic supernatural elements (immortality, sensitivity to garlic and crucifixes, etc.), imbuing her Sanguin with a proper evolutionary history instead, and then connecting it all together via motherhood.

"Without question, one of the big linchpins for this was reading Leonard Shlain's *Sex, Time, and Power*," she notes. "It's a non-fiction book where – as a doctor himself but not an anthropologist or archaeologist or anything – he delineated how the human species has evolved largely because of drivers with women; you know, cranial size of the young, nutrition needs for the mothers, sociocultural practices that had to develop, how very dangerous it is for us to give birth. I mean, for women, since time immemorial, death, sex, and birth are just so combined. And I think in some ways, the vampire myth continues to resonate with human beings from every culture because of that very connection, that nexus of those three heady, heady issues."

While Luke may ultimately solve his case at the end of *Hemo Sapiens*, it's far from the end of the story.

"I had to walk a tightrope between pleasing my editor [in regards to] what I could put on the page and what I had to keep back for my planned second book, which would be called *Hemophage*, which means Blood Eater," Weedon notes, before revealing that "Of course, the third one [will be called] *Hemophilia*."

nie Bolton, a nature-attuned healer who escapes an 18th-century witch hunt. When others follow, Annie leads the women in making a blood pact with the tree to ensure their daughters' good fortune. What happens next forms the legend of the Dark Sisters, a pair of ghastly women who live in the tree and whose hair, twisted into a shared braid, binds them together.

As the town name's obvious allusion to *The Scarlet Letter* may suggest, subtlety is not *Dark Sisters*' strong suit. DeMeester brushes the novel's feminist themes broadly and brightly, no mere subtext, recalling *The Stepford Wives* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. With a single exception (a nonthreatening best friend type), the men in the novel are complicit at best and sadistic at worst, with a lot of all-wet sexist assholes in between. The end they meet is a Grand Guignol revenge fantasy that leaves no room for nuance in judging their misdeeds.

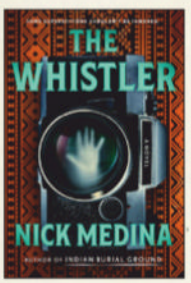
On the surface, *Dark Sisters* delivers a frightening new monster, plenty of illness-based body horror, and an over-the-top, bloody climax sure to please those looking for conventional scares. But the novel's success lies in fulfilling its real purpose: to create a microcosm of American patriarchy at its intersection with Christian misogyny and then let us watch that world be purged.

KARL RICHTER

THE WHISTLER

Nick Medina
Berkley

Nick Medina's third novel set on the fictional Takoda Tribe reservation in Louisiana spins a yarn about some of the most horrible hauntings, those carried inside as shame, regret, and self-pity. They manifest in this story as shadowy spectres and Native American folk monsters made real, but as Medina gradually reveals, it's the protagonist's inner life that is the well-spring of the story's scares.



Henry Hotard is a young garage band guitarist on "the rez" who, with his girlfriend Jade and best friend Toad, creates popular online ghost-hunting videos. Everything changes one night when the trio enters a derelict house where decades ago a teenage girl and her parents died in gruesome fashion. As local folklore goes, she had been hearing a chilling, disembodied whistle everywhere she went.

Shortly after that misadventure, Henry crashes his truck and becomes paralyzed from the chest down. The aftermath complicates not only his drive to investigate the paranormal, but also his relationships with Jade, Toad, and the grandparents who raised him. Medina dedicates much of the book to an admirably sympathetic look at the real challenges of those with paralysis, including others' misunderstanding of the condition.

How those events connect with each other, and with another involving a different bloody death, is the mystery unspooled in the book. The narrative jumps between before-crash and after-crash timelines, which can get a little confusing because the two are rather close together. Another potentially perplexing factor is that *The Whistler* is connected to Medina's previous novel, *Indian Burial Ground*, by characters and events that only readers of that book will fully understand.

Pacing is also a problem, as much of the prose is a tad long-winded and many scenes somewhat over-described. But *The Whistler* remains a solid story, and Henry's satisfying character arc redeems the book's imperfections.

KARL RICHTER

LIBRARY OF THE DAMNED

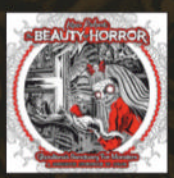
STALK THAT STOCKING!

Just because the halls are decked with shiny baubles and glimmering tinsel and the normies are overdosing on Christmas carols, eggnog, and saccharine holiday cheer, doesn't mean we aren't itching for some Halloween-in-December. So, here's a selection of spooky new stuff – for monster kids young and old – guaranteed to add a bit of macabre mayhem to those carefully hung stockings. Happy Holidays!

SUNSET SCARES

If the wee ones are already busy planning for next Halloween (who isn't?), this softcover picture book by co-authors Oliver Robins and Dustin Warburton (and illustrator Jared Gagnon) will take them out on the town in the meantime. Featuring a trio of past-their-prime spooks, the book asks its young readers what a bunch of old monsters should do now that horror's moved on to new, scarier creatures. Featuring colourful, cartoonish art that's just the right amount of creepy cute and a rhyming narrative, *Sunset Scares* invites youngsters to join Grimface, Slasher, and Blade as they help a confused child, happen upon a big realization, and embark on a (sort-of) new career. Spooky, wholesome fun.

THE BEAUTY OF HORROR: GHOULIANA'S SANCTUARY FOR MONSTERS



The latest installment of *The Beauty of Horror* colouring book series doesn't just offer up a bunch of ghoulish and macabre imagery to bring to vivid life, but as its back cover proclaims, it's "the very first horror storybook that you can colour!" The tale that unspools over the book's 88 pages, courtesy of author/illustrator Alan Robert, kicks off in Agatha's Odds & Ends. Colour the shop's ancient relics, curious specimens, books, skulls, and creepy artwork, then descend beneath the store to uncover demons, zombies, and countless other beasties housed in the Creepatorium, where they are fretting over the unexpected arrival of ghoul-girl Ghouliana. Will she be friend or foe? Grab those pencil crayons and/or markers and find out!

OFFICIAL NOVELIZATIONS FROM ECHO ON PUBLICATIONS

Have a hard-to-buy-for horror fan on your holiday list? How about a novelization of a classic fright flick? Echo On Publications has you covered with a wide assortment to choose from, including recently released novelizations of 1984's *Night of the Comet*, 1986's *Witchboard*, 1987's *The Gate*, 1994's *In the Mouth of Madness*, and 2005's *The Descent*, which join earlier releases *Session 9*, *The First Power*, and the *Maniac Cop* trilogy. Many of Echo On's novelizations are handled by Christian Francis (who has done previous tie-in work with Encyclopocalypse Publications), and most are available in multiple formats – including hardcover, trade paperback, and mass market paperback – for the discerning film buff.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

Follow Monica on Substack at libraryofthedamned.substack.com

THE FRIGHT GALLERY

CURATED BY PAIGE REYNOLDS

227

THIS MONTH:

THE GHASTLY GLOOMSCAPES OF EGO

A RUE MORGUE COLLECTIBLE

Enter the nightmare world of enigmatic visual artist Ego, who creates highly detailed, intricate acrylic paintings with finesse and masterful technique. Unusual and macabre, his subjects gaze back from a twilight netherworld haunted by elements of the natural world. Enter and never leave.

NAME

Ego

HOMETOWN HAUNT

"For much of my childhood, I lived with my grandmother in New Jersey. I have lived in Seattle, Washington, for the past 32 years."

WEAPON OF CHOICE

"I mostly paint with fluid acrylic on wood panels. I rely on the fast drying time of acrylic paint to quickly create multiple thin layers. Wood panels are good for a few reasons: I like how durable they are, and I'm able to sand down the corners of the panels to round them off a little, which is just an aesthetic thing."

DEEDS

"I've been fortunate enough to be included in many projects over the years that have made me feel moments of pride, but the thing I'm most proud of overall is the fact that against all odds I have been able to eke out a living (however meagre) in the only career I've ever wanted to pursue."

MY NIGHTMARE FUEL

"It shouldn't be surprising that horror and sci-fi movies, books (comics), and TV shows were early inspirations for my creativity, further nurtured by the sights and sounds of heavy metal and punk rock. The visuals associated with those genres of music affected me in ways that were so unpredictably profound. That music intertwined with the culture surrounding skateboarding, which has been a crucial part of my development as an artist and a human being in general since the 1980s."

LAST WORDS

"If a thing is worth doing, don't half-ass it. Try to put your whole ass into it, every time."

RESTING PLACE

Find Ego online at Lordego1.com, and on Instagram: @Lordego1

FOLLOW PAIGE ON INSTAGRAM @PAIGEREYNOLDSART

A DUMPSTER DIVE INTO HORROR'S ODDS & CURIOS

DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

BY STACIE PONDER

WHILST MINDLESSLY DOOM-SCROLLING RECENTLY, I SPENT MAY-BE SIX WHOLE SECONDS STARING AT AN ad for a productivity app (isn't it ironic!) and lo, my algorithm was instantaneously flooded with rise-n-grinders telling me how to rise-n-grind and maximize my time down to the microsecond. I am not sure what any of those "life coach" folks actually do beyond telling others to do more, but hey, today's tough economy and gig culture demands what I've heard the youths call a "sigma" mindset, so I'm gonna do it!

For those who hope their hot tips will earn a few pennies from my clicking and downloading, however, I am looking to the past to learn the true secrets of productivity from the real rise-n-grinders. I'm talking, of course, about the killers from the heyday of the slasher movie era.

Sure, sure, murder is bad. But were the murderers not some of the most hardworking people/forces of evil you've ever seen? Look at Michael Myers, going on road trips and lugging around bodies and headstones. When he's not turning into a motorcycle and killing people, Freddy Krueger crafts his own bespoke razor-gloves! And Jason Voorhees, well, we could be here all day talking about everything he accomplished between his career bookends of building a lean-to and going to outer space. The output of the lowliest z-grade slasher psycho would surely leave the most alpha sigma crypto bro feeling lazy and crying over his time-saving nutrition sludge. If there's someone to be crowned the king of hustle culture… someone to put even workaholic Jason to shame, however, it's Kenny Hampson of the Canadian choo choo chiller *Terror Train* (1980).

Kenny's journey to murderous madness begins the way many a slasher killer's does, with a prank gone horribly awry. After canoodling with what turns out to be a medical cadaver (whoops), Kenny is shipped off to the insane asylum. Three years later, he boards a party train to enact his revenge on the perpetrators of the practical joke that broke his brain. Wasting no time, he gets down to business – murder business – before the train leaves the station, then goes on to murder about ten more people in the span of a few hours. But it's not just the death count that separates Kenny from the likes of a lazybones such as Michael "Oh, look at me, I managed to kill four people over the course of two days" Myers. His work ethic is above and beyond the simple murder and subsequent artful body placement enacted by his slasher peers, as made evident by the detail that choo choos along my brain tracks: Kenny does all his murdering whilst also working a job!

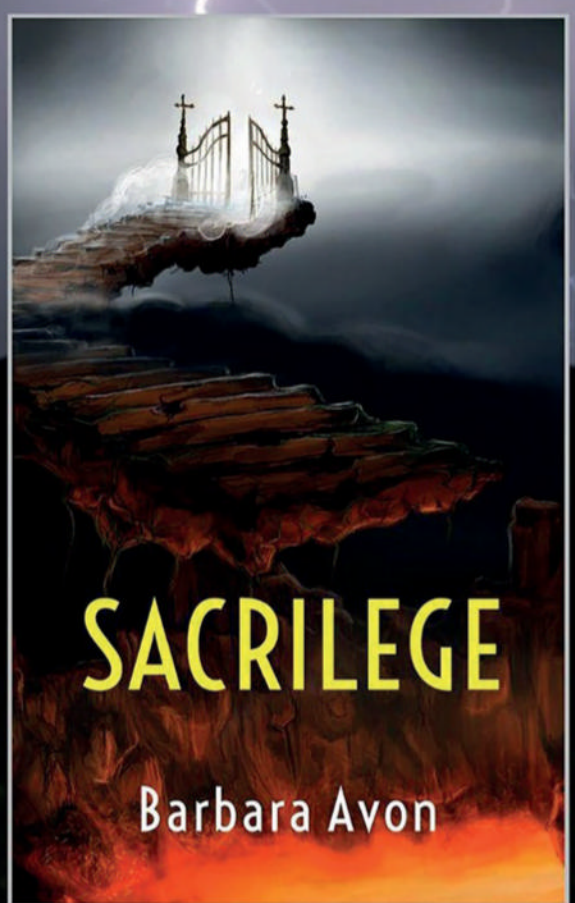
We don't often learn about how a slasher killer funds their lifestyle. Oftentimes they steal what they need (à la Myers and Voorhees) or still live at home whilst running a family business à la Norman Bates. When 2010's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* remake Freddy Krueger (yes, I'm mentioning that movie!) entered the realm of the supernatural, he wisely ditched his groundskeeper career to prioritize menacing teenagers. I mean, who has the time?

Kenny Hampson does, apparently: in the span between his hospital stay and his trip on the terror train, Kenny became proficient in drag couture and landed a job as a magician's assistant. He booked the act a gig on the train, and while the partiers partied, the duo performed several times – sleight of hand, levitation, razzle-dazzle choreography, the whole bit. For each performance, Kenny wore different makeup, different gowns, and different wigs. Meanwhile, in lieu of packing his own signature killin' outfit, he opted to don various masks and costumes nabbed from the revellers he murdered. This results in several complete disguise changes throughout the journey, in between everything else he has going on. Think about it: put on gown, wig, and makeup, perform magic, take off gown, wig, and makeup, put on lizard mask, commit murder, clean up the blood, take off lizard mask, put on gown… I'm exhausted just typing that, and it's a mere fraction of what Kenny gets done. He puts the "busy" in "really fucking busy" and should have launched a productivity app to teach me and the sigma bros his ways. He could have used the proceeds to seek help for his thirst for murderous revenge!

On the other hand, the film ends with Kenny falling from the terror train, splatting on the snow, and drifting down an icy river, proving that rising and grinding forever for a life chockablock full of work and "productivity" isn't the key to a long, prosperous, well-lived existence. Guess I'll keep scrollin' the horror aisle until I find the answer.

THIS BOOK SHOOK ME!

-LITERARY TITAN



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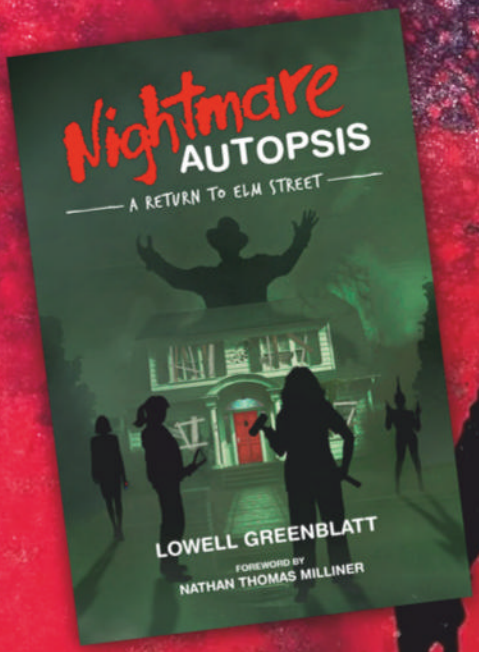

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AUDIO DROME

DEADLY | DANGEROUS | DECENT | DULL | DRIVEL | DOA DEAD ON ARRIVAL

REVIEWS BY ALEX DELLER, JILLIAN DRACHMAN, AARON VON LUPTON, AND JEFF SZPIRGLAS

SPANNED CANYONS

INSTRUMENTAL

The Only Perfect Way for This to End

(Independent)

Spanned Canyons (a.k.a. *Rue Morgue* alumnus Gary Gahan and company) invites you to slip on a pair of headphones and descend into an open-veined bath of lulling soundscapes. The opening track, appropriately titled "The Descent," plays with various layers of static and a mournful saxophone to full effect. That's pretty much the mood for the whole album, in which the sax continues to wail throughout, like a foghorn piercing the mist that envelops each densely mixed track. Voices occasionally sound out, although it's hard to hang onto any specific thematic strands, but maybe we're not meant to. As with previous offerings, Spanned Canyons' collages of white noises evoke the liminal spaces of dreaming – no small feat. In the meantime, look for these sounds to appear in independent horror films on their way to lighting up your imagination in oh so many demonic ways. . ☠☠☠½ **JS**

LOLA BLANC

POP

Crowd Pleaser

(Independent)

Having tackled themes of division and hate in her short horror film *Pruning* (2023), Lola Blanc now turns to more personal sociological themes on her debut full-length, *Crowd Pleaser*. Sounding somewhere between a muscled-up Fiona Apple and Gwen Stefani, Blanc croons commandingly on songs like "Everybody" (about validation and narcissism) and "Dear Sara," the album's standout track that delves into hagsploitation and the fear of aging. Both songs have horrific and gory cinematic videos directed by Blanc that are easily found on YouTube, and we recommend you seek them out. Perhaps the best thing about *Crowd Pleaser* is its deceptive nature: it looks like a pop album, sounds like a pop album, and the song titles vibe like a pop album… but only on experiencing Blanc's visual talents can you see her darker message lurking underneath the gloss. ☠☠☠☠ **AVL**

CRIPPLING ALCOHOLISM

GOTH

Camgirl

Portrayal of Guilt Records

Camgirl presents audiences with a surprise-filled offering that may be described as party music for psychopathic stoners, incorporating elements of gothic rock, noise music, pop, doom, and more. The novelty of the album makes it all the more disturbing, as cuteness intertwines with grime while pliers meet weak hands. *Camgirl* tells the titillating story of seductress Bella Pink through multiple points of view and, in doing so, spins a tale of transactional sex, drugs, and violence. Low and distorted, sinister male vocals are complemented by different female voices on this record full of contrast. The psychologically disturbing lyrics interact well with the overall dark yet neon-flashing, catchy, synth-laced compositions. The band, meanwhile, operates with the smoothness of a pimp while it allows just the right amount of rage to manifest. Pleasantly sleazy throughout, *Camgirl* ultimately amounts to an uneasy listen, sucking its listeners deep into the mire of despair. ☠☠☠☠ **JD**

KUOLEMANKELLO

ROCK

Perkeet

Svart

Finnish rock act Kuolemankello seems rather preoccupied with our limited time on Earth – the band's name translates to "death watch" (which is also a type of beetle but, y'know, we tend to look on the dark side of things here). As morbid a sentiment as this might seem, *Perkeet*'s big, ballsy rock 'n' roll certainly doesn't linger down in the dumps for long, mixing brash, clanging riffs with soulful, phlegm-coated vocals. While other bands pottering round the proto-metal and classic rock landscape might fall into tedious classicism or fey witchiness, Kuolemankello goes straight for the jugular – almost every song here exudes something primal and gut-level, like first-album Black Sabbath duking it out with a gobby '70s punk act while Queens of the Stone Age heckle from the sidelines. This isn't to say that a mysterious occult shadow isn't present: "Valoni," for example, looks to *Rosemary's Baby* for inspiration. ☠☠☠½ **AD**

HORROR SECTION

PUNK

Part III: Return to Rot

Eccentric Pop

Horror Section's third full-length has Halloween firmly on its mind… along with the third installment of as many horror franchises as possible. The LP cover offers a *Creepshow*-like ghoul manning the booth at an all-night movie marathon, complete with dollar store decorations and fake orange leaves hanging in a tree, while the insert drips nostalgia in the form of elementary school cheesecloth ghosts. Musically, the Missouri horror heroes haven't changed much, just more Ramones-meets-Teenage Bottlerocket three-chord pop punk about slasher stereotypes, flesh-eating zombies, and alien invaders that all sound more like sad love songs written to the girl who ripped your heart out before the prom. The movie references are obscure (even for me), and you'll really

MIDNIGHT SYNDICATE

INSTRUMENTAL

Darkened Corners

Entity Productions

Ohio-based brethren of all things ghostly, Midnight Syndicate recently landed a dream gig providing the soundtrack for Las Vegas' year-round experience *Universal Horror Unleashed*, but the duo behind the music has been on the haunted attraction circuit for decades. On *Darkened Corners*, the group offers outtakes and rarities from some of its finer moments at *Halloween Horror Nights* and *HalloWeekends*. In the former category you'll find the Circus-of-Horrors-themed "Carnival of Carnage" and "Building the Carnival" (previously only available on the limited edition vinyl *Music of Halloween Horror Nights*, sold at the shows) while the latter gig featured the famed intro "Mr. Midnight Theme," and remixes of "Morbid Fascination" and "Unrest in the East Wing," both from *Gates of Delirium* (2001). Though it's tailor-made for October 31, readers of this magazine will find Midnight Syndicate's music a year-round visit to the darkened corners of their darkest nightmares. ☠☠☠☠ **AVL**

PODCASTS FROM BEYOND

PSYCHOANALYSIS: A HORROR THERAPY PODCAST

THEME: Horror and Therapy
FORMAT: Discussion
FREQUENCY: Archived

Most horror fans are accustomed to "normal" people assuming they must be mentally unwell to enjoy movies full of fear and violence. But *Psychoanalysis: A Horror Therapy Podcast* believes the genre is more deep than depraved and aims to prove it by exploring horror films through the lens of mental health.

Right out of the gates, this podcast deserves an award for finding an angle that hasn't already been done to death. Hosted by therapy advocates Lara Unnerstall, Jenn Adams, and licensed therapist Mike Snoonian, *A Horror Therapy Podcast* applies themes such as PTSD, grief, family issues, anxiety, and phobias to a variety of genre works. The benefits are twofold: listeners get to deep dive into their favourite films (and perhaps see them in a new light), and human psychology is made more accessible via examples from well-known films.

Each episode starts with an amusing synopsis of the film(s) at hand, followed by a "feelings check" where the hosts reminisce about the first time they watched the movie, and their feelings about it now. No strangers to therapy themselves, the hosts are open with their own experiences with trauma, relationship issues, grief, and mental illness, and how horror has helped them cope. Although sometimes long (most episodes run between 90 minutes and two hours), the conversations aren't all heavy – there are actually more laughs than one might expect.

Blending personal observations with excerpts from academic research papers and books, the trio breaks down how the chosen theme appears throughout the film – the ways in which PTSD manifests in *The Descent*, for example, or the attachment style between M3gan and her young charge. Bad relationships run rampant in *Midsommar*, *Possession*, and *The Invisible Man* while toxic fandom flares up in *Misery*. Even paranoia comes to play in *Fright Night* and *The 'Burbs*.

For anyone interested in exploring a new side of horror, or even looking to better themselves through therapy, this is a great starting point (although it's not to be used as a diagnostic tool or replacement for actual counselling, as the hosts emphasize at the top of every episode). Having launched in 2020, *A Horror Therapy Podcast* is an interesting – if not a bit triggering – listen as the hosts navigate some of the most emotionally and mentally taxing times in recent history. While the show seems to have ended in mid-2023, there are almost 150 episodes in the archive that are worth exploring.

JESSICA BUCK

have to pay attention to the lyrics on "Together Forever" and "Broke the Rules" to pick up which film franchise they're about, but take that as a fun challenge for your next horror hang. ☠☠☠ **AVL**

CAESAREAN

METAL

Wretched Decrepitude
HORROR PAIN GORE DEATH

When a record has what looks like *Return of the Living Dead*'s Tarman zombie splashed gooily across its cover and opens with a soundbite from *The Crazies* trailer, you know you're in for a ghoulish ride. With this debut EP, Philly-based act Caesarean cranks things up to eleven as it smashes death metal, thrash, and grindcore together. Things are brisk and brutal with riffs hacking, gouging, and hammering as the moment so demands, while no fewer than three separate gurglers provide vocal invocations. Despite the lean runtime there's also a fair amount of intrigue to be found oozing its way through the decaying corpus, from the rats-in-the-walls guitar parts scrabbling within "Grotesque Transfiguration" to the presence of malicious melodies in "Perverse Formulary of Human Fluids" that recall *Heartwork*-era Carcass. These additional elements heighten the excitement, while also ensuring the band's infectious pathogens should continue to linger on. ☠☠☠½ **AD**

SPECIES

METAL

Changelings
20 BUCK SPIN

That the stargazing thrashers that comprise Species share their name with a 1995 sci-fi shocker is somewhat fitting. Like the film's antagonist, the band blends human souls with deadly alien power – though it also evidences more intelligence (and less sauce) than Roger Donaldson's cinematic caper. Rather than focusing on the traditional power and aggression of thrash metal's big four, Species looks to the outer limits instead, channelling progressively minded entities such as Watchtower, Confessor, and the like. The group effortlessly splices crunch with complex convolutions, emerging from its wormhole with a blend of choppy thrash, evocative synth work, ecstatic fusion outbursts, and graceful flights of bass-playing fancy. This might sound like a heavy lift if you just want to get caught in a mosh, but anyone keen to flex their brain meats while unpicking songs about creatures crafted from strung-together corpses will be eagerly buckling up and preparing for lift-off. ☠☠☠☠½ **AD**

KYŪKETSUKI

METAL

Nightmare Detective
(INDEPENDENT)

Revered visionary Maxime "Yūrei" Taccardi returns with an ingenious new offering from his one-man musical project, Kyūketsuki. Mainly inspired by Japanese horror, *Nightmare Detective* drags listeners into the depths of hell with outstanding compositions and lyrics, with Yūrei paying tribute to films like *Tetsuo*, *Devil Fetus* and, of course, *Nightmare Detective*. He also guides listeners on an utterly soul-crushing journey into the famous Suicide Forest in Aokigahara. His decision to primarily use saturated bass for the main riffs, which are then topped with regular bass, enhances the sinister vibe within gangrenous atmospheres reeking of death. He also masterfully incorporates synths, xylophone, taiko, and drums with profoundly haunting effect, flawlessly executing both the lead vocals and maximally eerie choirs. *Nightmare Detective* is completed by a stunning cover painted by Yūrei in his own blood, the ideal visual accompaniment to the sonic atrocities within. ☠☠☠☠☠ **JD**

TOOLKIT OF TERROR

MUSIC HAS ALWAYS BEEN A VITAL PART OF THE HORROR MOVIE LANDSCAPE. THE NEWTON BROTHERS HAVE EMERGED AS ONE OF THE MORE RECOGNIZED NAMES IN MODERN COMPOSITION, HAVING apprenticed under Hans Zimmer and contributing to much of Mike Flanagan's most celebrated stuff (*The Haunting of Hill House*, *Doctor Sleep*). Now, John Andrew Grush and Taylor Newton Stewart (not actually brothers) are set to put the future of horror movie scores into our own hands with *Tenebra*, a digital library of their own sounds, ready to be moulded into something new entirely.

A collaboration with music tech company Spitfire Audio, *Tenebra* compiles over 100 different sounds from The Newton Brothers, created in the duo's studio with their collection of vintage and modern synths, along with other original instruments.

"The team at Spitfire are incredibly creative, each of them is an artist in their own right," the Newtons explained to me over email. "We had a meeting and mentioned a general direction of tone that we wanted to approach with the library sound and look. From there, it became very collaborative. We would craft the sounds, and they would integrate them into their player, and we'd go back and forth with it to dial each one in."

At present, all of the Newtons' church bells, ghostly whisperings, heavy drones, and unique instrument recordings – including a giant ocarina or, as the Newtons call it, "the black flute" – are available to be used with audio production tools Logic Pro X, Pro Tools, and Cubase. While the possibilities for experimentation and sonic exploration are endless, *Tenebra* is particularly suited for the horror, thriller, or dark sci-fi genres, making it possible for anyone with access to easily create music that would sound right at home in the next Shudder exclusive.

"We think *Tenebra* has a very broad scope," say the Newtons. "You can use the presets for instant vibe and inspiration or dig deeper to create something truly bespoke. Directors are always asking for scores that feel unique, something that expands the sonic landscape. For more traditional composers, this can provide an edge. For hybrid composers, it's a playground to craft something entirely their own or to help with inspiration."

If you are new to composing, you don't necessarily have to start from scratch either. "Tenebra" is Italian for "darkness," and while the sounds that come out of this library are indeed very dark, the Newtons maintain that the key to an effective horror score lies in finding a vulnerability to the music, and a dash of optimism within all that darkness. *Tenebra* is designed to help composers do just that.

"There are quite a few hopeful and dreamy sounds in the library, which really mirror our own scores," they note. "For us, it's always about emotion and connection, moments in the story that allow you to feel love, loss, or fragility before tragedy sets in. That glimmer of hope that everything might turn out okay is often what makes the darkness hit harder."

So just like kids who read monster magazines in the '80s and ordered books by Tom Savini and Dick Smith to learn makeup effects and try their hands at the trade, newer horror fans can use *Tenebra* as a toolkit to delve into the esoteric world of modern horror and create music and atmospheres of their own. Check out some samples of *Tenebra* as well as a video walkthrough featuring the Newtons themselves at Spitfireaudio.com.

PLAY DEAD

NOW PLAYING > DEAD RESET, STRANGE ANTIQUITIES

DEAD RESET

PC, PlayStation, Xbox, Switch, iOS, Android
Wales Interactive

Full-motion video (FMV) has always filled a strange niche in the gaming landscape. Typically, it's not game-y enough for the purists, not book-y enough for the visual novel crowd, and is confined within the constraints of a playable-film gimmick. Indie developer/publisher Wales Interactive made a mark in the FMV world with games such as 2016's *The Bunker* and 2020's *The Complex*, and *Dead Reset* showcases all of the upsides and downsides of how the company approaches this niche: there's high-quality, compelling storytelling, but there's so little gameplay that it's essentially a sometimes-interactive movie.

The story centres on Cole Mason, a surgeon who wakes up in a grimy research station with no memory, but is nonetheless forced at gunpoint to operate on a woman who's got a nasty case of parasite-in-the-belly. Players make one of two choices for Cole: the moment plays out (usually disastrously) and if Cole dies, things reset because he's trapped in a death loop. It's not a matter of simply waking up and choosing Option B, however. Cole learns from his mistakes, as do others. It's not always obvious where you chose wrong, or even if you did choose wrong, as selecting the same option might play out in different ways. With your help, Cole has to figure out what's up with all the looping time shit and find a way to escape, all the while managing relationships with a handful of station staff.

Dead Reset is wickedly gory and chock full of practical effects that will elicit the winces and laughs in a way that only over-the-top gore can. (There's even a scene involving an eyeball or two that would make Lucio Fulci proud.) It's not long into the game's roughly three-hour length, though, that the choices become fewer and farther between, pushing the "interactive" part of

"interactive movie" to the background for long stretches. As I closed in on one of the game's four possible endings, my button-pushing fingers kinda fell asleep, but I was still hooked enough to see who would survive, what would be left of them, and if any of them would smooch.

STACIE PONDER

HEADSHOTS: GORE AND ACTING ARE ON POINT; IT'S FUN TO WATCH YOUR CHOICES PLAY OUT
MISFIRES: LONG STRETCHES WITH NO GAMEPLAY, WHICH IS RELEGATED TO BINARY CHOICES

STRANGE ANTIQUITIES

PC
Bad Viking/Iceberg Interactive

The highly anticipated follow-up to 2022's *Strange Horticulture* has arrived! More a spiritual successor to the eerie point-and-click puzzle game than a sequel, *Strange Antiquities* casts you in the role of an amateur thaumaturge, looking after customers who visit your occult antique shop while your boss is away on mysterious business. But it's *all* mysterious business around these parts – patrons will be looking to you and your trusty shop cat to help them select the right pendant, artifact, or totem for ailments ranging from simple loneliness to hexes and curses. It's up to you to fully inspect your stock of wares and consult the right reference material in order to help (or hinder) your clients.

Sound like a bit of pre-internet research project drudgery? Hardly! Occult tomes are rarely straightforward, and the successful curio dealer will have to make use of all their wit and instinct to identify the right charm or trinket. Nothing in the shop ought to be taken for granted as even more clues and artifacts lurk within desk drawers, cabinets... and beyond. The town of Undermere has a larger mystery at hand, one that sees its residents attacked by birds, succumbing to madness, or simply turning up dead with the whites of their eyes stained a foul, inky black. Updates on this situation come to you via your patrons but you also play a role in this wider narrative when clients come in for questionable purposes, and the game offers you the choice between helping them out or cooling their heels – and every choice has consequences.

Some of the puzzles are downright maddening, but the penalty for too many wrong guesses isn't harsh, and a hint mechanism keeps things

Eli White
I am leaving the shop in your care, with some reluctance I might add.
Make use of my reference materials - here, take this.
OK

moving when you're stumped. Overall, *Strange Antiquities* drips with the moody, Edwardian shopkeeper-sim charm that made *Strange Horticulture* a Steam sensation; a satisfying time in a creepy world explored one trinket at a time.

ANDREA SUBISSATI

HEADSHOTS: IMMERSIVE DESIGN AND CHALLENGING PUZZLES MAKE FOR COZY, SATISFYING GAMEPLAY
MISFIRES: PLAYERS MAY LOSE THEMSELVES FOREVER IN THE FOG OF UNDERMERE, WITH DARKENING EYES....

Horror Culture

Rue Morgue TV

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'TIS THE SEASON FOR ANNUAL VIEWINGS OF CLASSIC HOLIDAY HORROR – *BLACK CHRISTMAS*, *SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT*, *KRAMPUS*... BUT WHAT OF THOSE LESSER-KNOWN MOVIES THAT ALSO DESERVE A PLACE UNDER THE TREE? TWO OF OUR WRITERS ENTER THE RING TO SETTLE THE BURNING QUESTION:

WHAT'S THE MOST UNDERAPPRECIATED CHRISTMAS-THEMED HORROR MOVIE OF ALL TIME?

TREEVENGE (2008)

MAGILL FOOTE

"There are few things that hit quite like seeing all the abused and forgotten trees exacting their gleeful vengeance."

VS

DONT OPEN TILL CHRISTMAS (1984)

ADAM CLARKE

"This killer's like a mad salesman because everything must go, and he's slashing more than prices!"

THE POOL OF CHRISTMAS-THEMED HORROR MOVIES ISN'T PARTICULARLY LARGE, AND THE NUMBER OF YULETIDE TERROR TALES YOU'D WANT TO WATCH more than once is smaller still. But there's one film that will forever be in the regular holiday viewing rotation in my horror-loving hearth; a film that finally puts the literal centrepiece of every Christmas get-together in the spotlight; a film that takes only fifteen minutes to deliver what most take 90 minutes or more to merely attempt. Believe it or not, the perfect holiday horror film is 2008's *Treevenge!*

Jason Eisener (director of the gore-soaked insanity that is *Hobo with a Shotgun*) finally delivers justice on behalf of all those stalwart evergreen trees that we so callously kick to the curb once the presents are unwrapped and the eggnog is chugged. In *Treevenge*, disgusted by society's ugly love of capitalism and sick of being mistreated by the heartless humans who claim December is the season for caring, the pines and firs fight back in a glorious sap-spattered massacre for the ages! Children are devoured, pets are maimed, limbs are chopped, eyeballs are gouged out with branches, and you even get to see Jonathan Torrens (best known as J-Roc from *Trailer Park Boys*) take a Christmas star to the neck, shuriken-style. There's enough blood to warrant comparisons to Peter Jackson's *Dead Alive* and a scene involving a baby with more graphic head trauma than *Hereditary*, all set to the leisurely tune of Riz Ortolani's iconic theme music from *Cannibal Holocaust*. Need I say more?

The greatest gift a holiday film can offer a horror fan is the grim satisfaction of watching shitty people get their just deserts underneath the garlands and mistletoe, and there are few things that hit quite like seeing all the abused and forgotten trees exacting their gleeful vengeance. With such a short runtime, you can even fit it into the same sitting as your favourite Rankin/Bass stop-motion special. Make sure you give your pine a little extra water tonight, folks – you wouldn't want to wind up among the bodies on Christmas Day!

THAT'S FINE IF YOU LOVE CHRISTMAS, BUT WHAT OF THE HORROR FAN WHOSE BLACK, ROTTEN HEART IS TWO SIZES TOO SMALL? WHAT OF ALL THE SURLY S.O.B.s who detest this time of year and everything it stands for? Luckily, there's a movie miserable enough for them, too: 1984's underseen, underappreciated underdog, *Don't Open Till Christmas*.

The plot is simple: London is terrorized by a serial killer targeting Santas, be they mall Santas, boozed-up Christmas party Santas, or strippers wearing sexy Mrs. Claus outfits. This killer's like a mad salesman because everything must go, and he's slashing more than prices!

Producer Dick Randall, one of the diseased minds behind Juan Piquer Simón's wildly entertaining *Pieces*, reunited with *Pieces* star Edmund Purdom to use every jobbing actor, empty set, and scrap of location footage to make this wintry slasher. There must have been some magic in an old silk hat they found because, like *Pieces*, *Christmas*' best features are its unflagging cruelty and stupidity. Memorable deaths include a Santa getting barbecued alive and another Saint Nick getting his Blitzen sliced off at a urinal. (The camera lingers on blood hitting the porcelain for that one.)

This forgotten slasher is equally compelling for its utter and total incoherence. Tonally, it's a cross between *Sleepaway Camp* and *Benny Hill*. The film has plenty of sexual content, but the direction is so thoroughly un-horny that it's like gawking at a *Playboy* after lapping up gallons of eggnog.

Don't Open Till Christmas was the gift that kept on giving, by which I mean Randall kept giving final cut to directors, writers, actors, and editors – but nobody wanted it! Characters appear and disappear without explanation, and Caroline Munro performs a disco number in an abandoned Sears before vanishing entirely. Meanwhile, Purdom's wearing the killer's mask during the murders, but the slasher's revealed to be a different character before Purdom is done in by an explosive prezzie.

If you hate holiday cheer like I do, stuff this strange Christmas turkey someplace nice. Humbug!

LAST ISSUE'S WINNER
AS VOTED BY YOU ON FACEBOOK

HAS THE FINAL GIRL TROPE FINALLY RUN ITS COURSE?

YES! 29% — 71% NO!

THE FINAL GIRL TROPE IS AS RELEVENT AS EVER!

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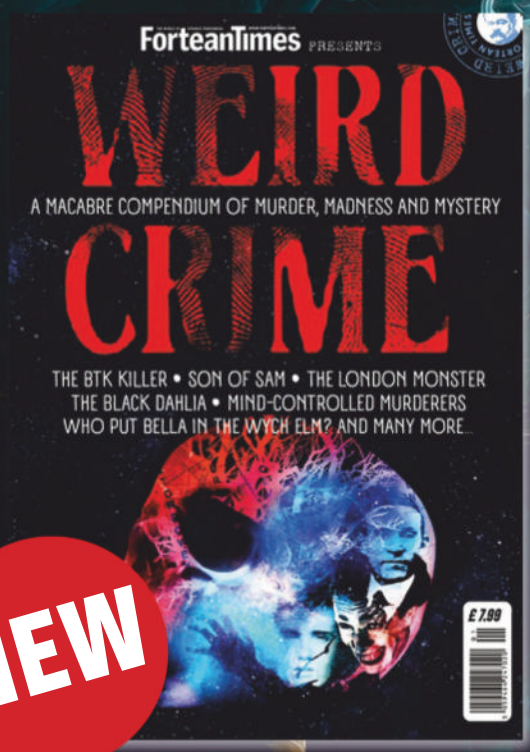
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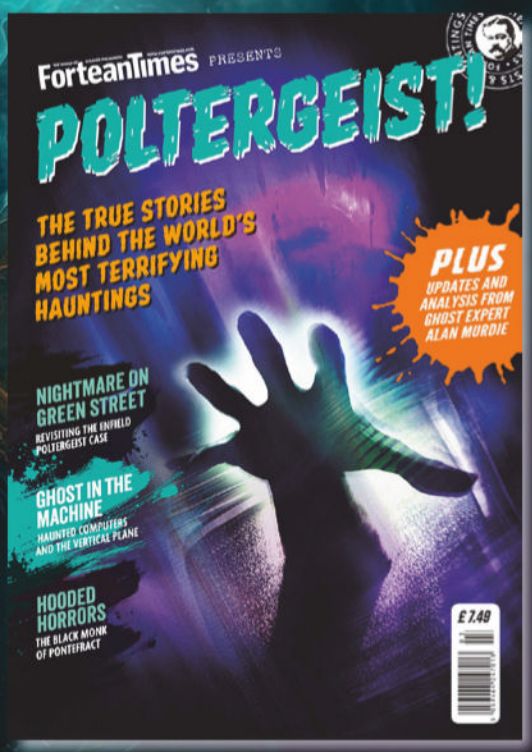
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